DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 130 450 EA 008 835

TITLE	Declining Enrollment: Current Trends in School Policies & Programs.
INSTITUTION	National School Public Relations Association, Arlington, Va.
PUB DATE	76
NOTE	65p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National School Public Relations Association, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209 (Stock No., 411-13329, $6.75; orders under $8.00 must be prepaid; orders over $8.00 must be prepaid unless submitted on an authorized purchase order)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Advisory Committees; *Board of Education Policy; Case Studies (Education); Community Involvement; *Decision Making; *Declining Enrollment; Elementary Secondary Education; Enrollment Projections; *Enrollment Trends; *Job Layoff; Program Descriptions; School Buildings; *School Closing; Space Utilization
IDENTIFIERS	Reduction in Force

ABSTRACT

Declines in student population are a fact of life in most of the nation's school districts. With the declines come unprecedented challenges and opportunities; sensitive community relations problems involved with school closings; costs that continue to rise despite the decline in student numbers; the need for staff reductions; the need for comprehensive advance planning involving both staff members and the community; lower teacher-student ratios and more room available for educational alternatives. Based on a nationwide survey of school districts, the report includes guidelines for making accurate enrollment projections; involving the staff, students, and community in planning and finding solutions; using alternatives such as magnet schools and clusters to help defuse the often emotionally charged atmosphere; and developing and maintaining a good public information program. The report features five case studies of districts that have met and solved their first rounds with declining enrollment. (Author/IRT)

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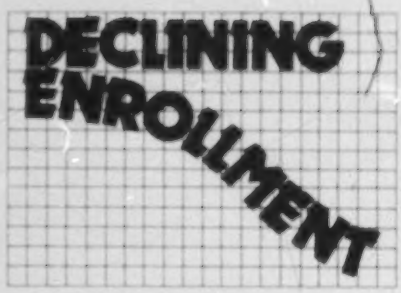

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DECLINING ENROLLMENT

CURRENT TRENDS in School Policies & Programs

EA 008 835

A Publication of the
National School Public Relations
Association

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National School Public Relations Association
1801 N. Moore Street
Arlington, Virginia 22209

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 76-53889

Single copy, $6.75.
Stock No. 411-13329. All orders under $8 must be accompanied by payment. All orders over $8 must be accompanied by payment unless submitted on an authorized purchase order from a school district, organization or institution. Billed orders will include shipping and handling charges. Address communications and make checks payable to National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209.

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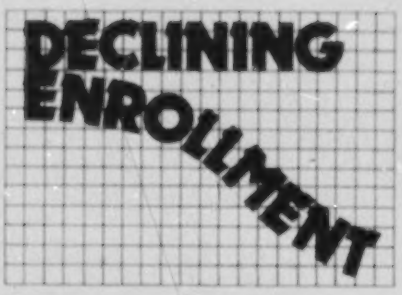

DECLINING ENROLLMENT

CURRENT TRENDS in School Policies & Programs

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Acknowledgement

Declining Enrollment is one of a series of Education U.S.A. Special Reports on current trends in school policies and programs. The purpose of the series is to provide school practitioners at all levels, and others concerned with education, with the most up-to-date information on problems which are at the core of today's constantly changing education scene.

Declining Enrollment was written by Carol B. Epstein of Washington, D.C. It was developed and produced by the Education U.S.A. Special Reports staff: Anne C. Lewis, Executive Editor, Cynthia C. Menand, Director of Editorial Services and John H. Wherry, Editorial Director. Special research, editorial and production services were provided by Lyn Broad, Nancy Colalillo, Janet Eaffy, Debbie Lucckese and Virginia McAllister.

The National School Public Relations Association expresses its gratitude to the hundreds of school districts, state departments of education and professional education associations which responded to requests for information and offered valuable assistance to the researchers, writers and editors of this report.

Overview

School enrollments are declining throughout the nation — not uniformly or even universally, but with enough persistence to constitute one of the most troublesome problems facing school districts today. Neither the magnitude nor the duration of the decline were foreseen by educational and statistical experts only a few years ago. The figures reflect not only a drop in the birth rate but also a new and particular kind of geographic mobility and a variety of other significant social trends.

If the decline in enrollment were a singular phenomenon, it would be relatively easy to manage. But other phenomena are occurring simultaneously, and each impinges on the other. The costs of operating a school system are rising, while the revenues — especially in those districts experiencing severe enrollment declines — are decreasing. Pressures from several directions are requiring school systems to pay greater attention to the racial and socioeconomic balance within their schools. Similar pressures are mandating specialized education services for learners with needs not always addressed adequately by some school districts. Throughout the country, there is a general feeling of disillusionment with the public institutions of our society. Education is but one of these, experiencing the impact of slackening support from a once totally committed patronage.

So, decline in enrollment is not an isolated problem. As one part of major dislocations in the nation's social patterns, it requires extraordinary leadership to devise methods of coping with it.

In its most successful form, that leadership comes forward early, faces the problem squarely and tackles the solution from the standpoint of the total educational program of the district.

Current forecasts indicate a reversal of the decline within a few years, but not a return to former social standards. School districts may for some time be dealing with declines at some levels and increases at others. About the only thing educators can definitely rely on for the foreseeable future is change — change in enrollments, in the public expectations for education, in available resources and in the nature of education as an institution. Long-range planning and a thorough rethinking of educational programs, structures and services is imperative.

Enrollment decline is generally viewed as a signal for retrenching, for tearing down what originally took great effort to build and for a pessimistic outlook in contrast to the heady optimism that accompanied the growth period. It can be viewed, however, as an opportunity to try things that no one had time to consider during the growing years. The attitude toward the decline makes a big difference in *how successfully it is handled*: if decline is seen as all bad, then whatever means are used to cope with it will not produce many positive results.

Eventually, enrollment decline reaches the point at which closing and consolidating schools becomes essential. Otherwise, a district risks committing too great a portion of its resources to capital maintenance and leaving too little for its central purpose — education. But decisions to close schools force communities to confront unpleasant realities. All the negative aspects of enrollment decline surface quickly when a closing is announced. The implication is that the community surrounding the targeted school has lost its youth and vitality.

It is little wonder, then, that school closings are resisted. Administrators and board members who have been through the process say there is no easy way to close a school. But some ways are better than others. Collecting all the facts and figures and running them through a computer that will regurgitate the answers is not one of the better ways. Closing and consolidating schools, reorganizing structures and programs and reducing personnel are all problems that do not lend themselves easily to objective appraisals, graphs, charts or arbitrary decisions. They are human problems. They require the involvement of the people they affect. Their

solutions must be based on fact, but they also require an element of subjectivity and concern for the people whose lives will be changed. Nothing is more devastating to a teacher being fired or a parent worried about a child's education, safety and social adjustment than a school administrator or board member who is perceived as "playing a numbers game."

In the process of seeking solutions, there is no one method for involving the many publics affected by decline. The method selected by a district must be tailored to the particular characteristics of the community's political, social and educational forces and the nature and urgency of the problem. This *Education U.S.A.* Special Report is an attempt to show how school districts throughout the nation have been dealing with declining enrollment. Its preparation included a survey of school districts across the country and extensive interviews with veterans of the school-closing process. It is intended to help those who still face the problem make the best decisions in their own school districts.

DECLINING ENROLLMENT

Are You on the Brink?

Does your district have a profile for declining enrollment? The following questionnaire from *Declining Enrollment*, a publication of the American Assn. of School Administrators, can help you gauge when to beware and prepare. Instructions say "YES" answers to questions 1-3 and "NO" answers to 4-8 mean you'd be wise to start making plans to meet the problem early.

1. Is your community close to a metropolitan area, and did it develop and grow as a result of population expansion in that metropolitan area?

2. Is your community one with expensive houses that continue to escalate in price disproportionately to general real estate values?

3. Does your community contain a high percentage of professionals or older people whose homes fulfill their lifetime needs and whose children are now in (or have been through) the local schools?

4. If your community has a highly reputed school system, will that good reputation draw in young families in spite of high-priced homes?

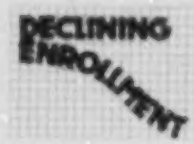
5. Does your community have a high level of mobility, with families moving in and out? (And who's moving in — families with children or retirees?)

6. Does your community contain pockets of middle-income housing that will attract young couples and families with small children?

7. Is there still land available in your community for future residential development?

8. Have service organizations (YMCA, YWCA, community clubs for children, religious groups) been maintaining an emphasis on programs for children of elementary school age? If not, is the decreasing emphasis because of diminishing numbers of children to be served?

Chapter 1.



The Scope of the Problem

It crept up quietly, catching just about everyone unaware. While the birth rate was starting a precipitate drop in the 1960s, school districts were floating bond issues and building new schools as fast as their capital budgets could be approved. While enrollments were peaking or leveling off between 1969 and 1971 in most places, planners were only holding their breaths for the next surge. After all, the reasoning went, when those babies born after World War II reached early adulthood, they would begin producing families that would again tax every resource of the school district.

Only it didn't happen that way.

Between 1950 and 1970, elementary school enrollment increased from 22 million to 37 million, and secondary school enrollment rose 120% — from 6.5 million to nearly 15 million. The teaching staff increased from 960,000 to 2.2 million nationwide. Administrators and school boards became preoccupied with crowded and antiquated facilities, teacher shortages and inadequate programs.

Both the money and a public commitment to education were there to help. Expenditures for public elementary and secondary schools rose during that period from $5.8 billion to $40.7 billion. Adjusted per-pupil expenditures climbed from $450 to $1,041. America's confidence in education was reflected in the fact that total educational expenditures amounted to 3.4% of the Gross National Product in 1949-50 and 7.5% in 1969-70. Federal funds for elementary and secondary education increased twentyfold, while state funding rose by more than 700% during that period.

Total school enrollment reached its high of 51.3 million in 1971, but by 1968 elementary school enrollment had already begun to drop. Between 1974 and 1975, it dropped by almost 600,000 students nationwide. By 1976, about 45,000 certified teachers were collecting unemployment insurance, and newly graduated teachers were looking everywhere but in the schools for jobs.

Local Fluctuations

Rarely does an individual school district exactly mirror trends across the nation. Some systems were hit by severe drops in enrollment long before national figures took the plunge. Others have yet to experience declines and several are still scrambling to keep up with growth. But there is a traceable pattern to the kinds of districts in each of these categories. And there is one constant element: 10 years ago, few local educational planners were prepared for the enrollment changes that occurred in the 1970s, whether those changes fit or deviated from the national pattern.

In California, for example, National City has been relatively stable for the past 15 years, while San Mateo has been experiencing a drop of about 1% per year and Huntington Beach has seen a drop of 23% over the past few years. Ventura suffered a decline of 0.3% a year for four years but has enjoyed a 0.2% increase for the past two. The Clovis Unified District is one of 12 to 15 districts in California with increases that exceed the state average. In Colorado, the Cherry Creek School District in Englewood had greater increases than it expected, but the adjacent Englewood Public School District lost 38% of its enrollment in the last 10 years.

Across the country in Massachusetts, Duxbury is growing but Peabody is losing pupils at the rate of about 2% per year. Vernon, N.J., is dealing with rapid growth, while Palisades Park suffered a 10% drop in two years. On Long Island, N.Y., Nanuet's enrollment has been falling by 7% a year but Middle Island is growing by 10% annually; upstate in Syracuse, enrollments have dropped 5% a year for the last three years.

In the South, Macon County, Ala., has had an enrollment drop averaging 2.3% a year for five years. The Ector City Independent School District in Odessa, Tex., has seen slight growth, the Brackett Independent School District has been

stable and Corpus Christi has faced losses averaging 5% per year.

Springfield and Delaware, Ohio, have had no declines, but the Parma City School District has declined by 5% a year. In the last five years, Madison Heights, Mich., lost 16.3% of its enrollment and Bloomfield Hills lost 8%; meanwhile, Beaverton gained by 25%. In Illinois, enrollment in Chicago Heights has increased; Erie saw a 10% increase in its elementary school enrollment between 1974-75 and 1975-76; Oak Park remains constant but still projected a greater enrollment than actually materialized; Franklin Park lost an average of 3.4% a year for the last eight years; and Mt. Prospect – an elementary school district – lost 37% of its enrollment in the last nine years and expects an additional 30% loss between 1975-76 and 1980-81.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The causes of the fluctuations in school enrollment include a combination of changes in the birth and fertility rates and changes in patterns of geographic mobility (themselves caused by significant changes in social and economic factors over the past 15 years). School planners need to understand the changes that have already occurred and keep an eye on those same factors for the next few years.

Birth, Fertility Rate Changes

Birth rate refers to the number of babies born per 1,000 in total population. The fertility rate is the number of births per 1,000 women in the childbearing years (ages 15 to 44). A given number of births in a single year indicates very little in the way of trends. What is important is to know what portion of the female population is of childbearing age and how many of them are having children. When the number of births hit a record high of 4.35 million in 1960, the number of women of prime childbearing age – 20 to 29 – was at a low of about 11 million. But both the birth and fertility rates were high. Through the 1960s, the number of potential childbearers grew as the *"war babies"* began to reach adulthood. But births plummeted to a low of less than 3.2 million in 1973 – over a million fewer than in 1960 – reflecting not only a low birth rate but also a low fertility rate. The birth rate fell from 18 per 1,000 population in 1971 to 14.8 in 1974.

All those women of childbearing age in the late 1960s and early 1970s simply were not having babies as those of the 1950s did. They were entering the labor force, which between 1960 and 1972 increased in number by 10 million and in percentage of workers by more than 5%. More were attending college, thereby postponing marriage and/or families. Some were getting married but were not starting families immediately. Better and more easily available contraceptives continue to make it possible for women to make such decisions.

According to surveys by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the young women of today intend to have families, but they intend to have them later – and smaller. The overwhelming majority of women surveyed in 1974 expected two or fewer children to complete their families, as contrasted with large numbers who had previously expressed preferences for three or more children during their lifetime. Statistics show the total number of children per woman has been declining steadily since the beginning of this century, except for a brief rise in the 1940s and 1950s. Even racial and ethnic differences in family size are beginning to disappear; the stated expectation of lifetime births among women of minority groups is rapidly approaching that of white women. In addition, in the last decade it has become more socially acceptable for women to choose either not to marry or to marry later in life, and also for couples to choose to remain childless.

Much of the contrast in the statistics between the 1950s and early 1960s on the one hand and the late 1960s and early 1970s on the other may be attributed to the women's liberation movement. And some of it is attributable to increasing public concern about population growth. But economic conditions play a large role as well. Looking back at the drop in births in the early 1930s, a woman's place was still the home but the heavy mortgage on that home was the overriding concern. By the late 1960s, another period of tremendous economic growth had come to an end. The strange combination of recession and, the inflation left in its wake, has made the cost of everything – including raising children – higher. Economic ups and downs have always affected birth and fertility rates. But the lack of uniformity with which school districts have been hit by the drop in numbers of children suggests that the drop in birth and fertility rates is not the only factor involved. Another major factor is the geographic mobility of the population.

Geographic Mobility Plays a Role

Americans are notorious movers. That the average American family moves once every five years is well known. More important to school planners, however, is the nature of the family that is moving and the destination of the move. While the most active movers have been young adults establishing new households and new families, either without children or with preschoolers, there have been subtle changes in the direction of their moves in recent years. And where those young families choose to locate and raise their children makes a big difference to the school systems.

In the 1960s, movement was generally toward the coasts, especially the Pacific, and to metropolitan areas. In the late 1950s, the South stopped losing population as more persons were moving in than were moving out.

From 1970 to 1975, according to census figures, more people moved *from* metropolitan areas than *to* them. While this change was a reversal of patterns in the previous five-year period, the bureau noted that it did not reverse the long-standing trend toward increasing urbanization of the American population. Much of the movement actually represents continued urban development around the fringes of metropolitan areas. Once-rural areas evolve into suburban subdivisions, still having attachments to the central city. But population growth in the early 1970s was not limited to areas adjacent to metropolitan centers. Adjacent counties grew 4.7% between 1970 and 1973, and nonadjacent counties also grew – 3.7%. And counties having no city with a population of more than 25,000 showed growth as well.

There is evidence of a growing disenchantment with urban living in the United States, which might well be reflected in greater flight from urban centers if preference were the only factor involved. A nationwide survey reported in *Demography* (August 1975) showed a strong preference for living in rural areas within 30 miles of a city of 50,000 population and a strong desire among residents of cities of 500,000 population or more to leave.

Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan area populations are now growing at about the same rate, each increasing by about 5% between 1970 and 1974. But there are important differences between city and suburban populations. The number of blacks in suburban areas has grown, but blacks still represent only about 5% of the suburban population. Blacks represent an increasing portion of city populations, however. The average income of families moving to the suburbs is higher than that of families moving to cities. Both cities and suburbs have lost in numbers of children under age 14 because of declining fertility rates, but suburbs show an increase in persons over 45 and in young adults 18 to 34 years of age. In both cities and suburbs, about half the families do not have children under 18 living at home.

Also during 1970-75, the South and West increased in population while the Northeast and North Central regions lost population, continuing the trend of the previous five years. The nation's migratory patterns have taken a decided turn toward the "sunbelt" – south of the Mason-Dixon Line, west to the Southwest and Rocky Mountain states and only a slight leveling off of the surge to the far west. As *Business Week* noted in a special report in May 1976, "The process of migration gathers a momentum that becomes self-sustaining." Business and industry continue to relocate in the South and West, spurred by lower tax rates and the greater availability of cheap and nonunionized labor and of energy sources. Professional persons and financially independent retirees – seeking a "good life" that is no longer defined as living in the established urban centers of New England and New York or along the chill northern industrial route to the West – have pushed down and out to more comfortable climates and open spaces. Between 1970 and 1975, Arizona and Florida increased in population by about 25%, compared to an average growth rate for the country as a whole of 4.8%. The West and South have accounted for 85% of the nation's growth since 1970. By contrast, New York lost 0.7% of its population and Rhode Island lost 2.4% in the five-year period.

School systems do experience the effects of the population pull. When the Educational Research Service reported enrollment changes in the nation's 50 largest school systems between fall 1971 and fall 1973, some interesting conclusions were drawn. Nine of these systems experienced enrollment increases during the period – all of them countywide districts rather than those within city boundaries; four were in Florida with one each in Georgia, Maryland, Louisiana, Nevada and Colorado – a definite trend to the South and West. Among districts having significant enrollment losses during the two years were Detroit (6.65%), Milwaukee (7.41%), St. Louis (8.82%), Indianapolis (10.14%) and Cincinnati (9.55%). Not only are those big losers in the Northeast and North Central regions; they are also among the largest urban

centers in the country. Other districts suffering declines are well within the attractive sunbelt, but they are big cities: Houston (6.60%), Dallas (9.75%), Memphis (the biggest drop – 18.18%), Duval County (Jacksonville), Fla. (7.66%), Orleans Parish, La. (7.67%), Denver (7.61%), San Francisco (6.69%) and Tulsa (9.29%). Evidently, the nature of the district (urban, suburban, or rural) is a more important factor in its enrollment patterns than its geographic location.

Reports from Local Districts

During the winter of 1975-76, *Education U.S.A.* surveyed its subscribers to find out whether their districts were experiencing enrollment declines, to what degree and with what effects, and how they were dealing with the situation. Responses were received from 276 districts in 43 states and three Canadian provinces. Of districts responding, 192 are experiencing decline; 63 stated they had no declines; and 30 said their enrollment is increasing. (The total exceeds 276 because some respondents separated their elementary and secondary enrollments.) In all of these districts, elementary enrollments are declining while secondary enrollments are either remaining stable or rising.

Many respondents reported no decline "at this time," revealing that their projections foresee declines in the future. Several more with no decline in overall enrollment said their elementary enrollments are going down but are offset by still rising secondary enrollments. Some districts, notably those in Pennsylvania and Vermont, said their declines have leveled off and project increases. Reports from New York State show that some of its districts are experiencing severe declines while others are witnessing some of their biggest growth.

The 192 declining districts are experiencing the enrollment drops to varying degrees. They report their annual losses as follows: 20, "slight"; 57, 0.5%-2.0%; 52, 2.1%-3.5%; 29, 3.6%-5.0%; 7, 5.1%-8.0%; 2, 8.1%-10.0%; 4, more than 10%; and 21 did not provide the information. Many of these districts having small declines have been losing students for several years, making the total loss highly significant. Salt Lake City, Utah, one of the most striking examples, has reported enrollment declines for 17 years. Most of the 192 districts responding had their peak enrollments during 1967-69.

Even within districts, and in districts reporting no overall decline, enrollment changes may vary from place to place. In answer to whether the district is losing in some schools and gaining in others, 128 responded "yes" and 126 responded "no." Nine of the latter have only one school serving each educational level; most of the "no's" came from districts reporting no declines.

Elaborating on the problem, 34 districts reported losing in elementary schools while gaining or remaining stable in secondary schools; most of these are already preparing for inevitable losses in secondary schools in the coming years. Two districts noted losses in rural areas, but 18 reported the severest losses in areas with no further growth potential and had gains in newly developed areas. Three districts reported shifts in enrollment due to desegregation. Many districts evinced feelings of despair by the comment, "All our schools are losing," and several added, "Some are merely losing faster than others."

What Are the Effects?

Almost before district officials may realize that enrollment is declining, they will be hit by an insidious effect – loss of state financial aid. When such aid is calculated on the basis of average daily attendance, it vanishes with the student. Unfortunately, the costs of educating students who were once in attendance do not disappear as quickly. Bonds must still be serviced; facilities maintained and staff salaries paid.

In a survey conducted by the National School Boards Assn. in 1975, 71% of the respondents listed reduced state aid as an effect of declining enrollment in their districts; it far outranked any other single effect in severity. Thirty-nine districts surveyed by *Education U.S.A.* reported loss of state aid as a "major problem." The Vinton (Iowa) Community Schools loses $2,236 for every student dropped from its rolls. The Goodland (Kans.) Unified School District reports a cut of $1,012 for each student lost. The Portland (Maine) Public Schools reported, "The impact is very serious. Under state financing, we lose almost $1,000 per student." The Mason County Central Public Schools, in Scottville, Mich., with an enrollment under 2,000, has lost $19,000 in state aid in recent years; the Garfield County School District in Panguitch, Utah, with an enrollment of 900, reports a loss of $186,000 in the past six years. The respondent from the Livonia (Mich.) Public Schools explains the problem: "Because of the way our state aid act is drawn, we receive only $280 for

each child in attendance, but when we lose a child the state takes $1,115 away from us."

Add to the loss of state aid the reductions in federal funding and — if the enrollment decline is occurring because of movement out of the district — a reduced local tax base, and the financial effects are indeed painful. Then add an inflationary economy that increases the cost of every item in a school district's budget, from staff salaries to fuel to books and pencils. The Millbrae (Calif.) School District reported that the effects are "significant enough to force insolvency — a $700,000 deficit for two years by 1977-78." Nationwide, total enrollment dropped by about 200,000 between 1974-75 and 1975-76, but total education expenditures rose by about $11 billion.

Meanwhile, the taxpaying public wonders why fewer children cost more to educate. But a district experiencing enrollment declines of 2%, 3% or even 5% will not be able to realize any savings for at least three years — when enough decline has occurred to enable consolidation of classes and reduction in personnel.

The Baltimore County (Md.) Public Schools spent $909 per child in 1970 and $1,400 per child in 1976; it projects a per-pupil cost of $2,000 by 1980. These increases reflect rising costs far more than additional services or resources. "School budgets are influenced more by the state of the economy than by the birth rate," the Baltimore system says. Their enrollment over the past four years is decreasing by about 2% a year, but the rate of inflation has been 12% to 16% over the same period. One less child in the classroom or on the school bus means less revenue but no budgetary saving.

If the children go and then the money goes, can the educational program be far behind? More than 20 school districts reported cutting staff and/or programs as a first step in dealing with declining enrollment. Several more stated that it is no longer possible to maintain the level of per-pupil expenditures called for in previous budgets. When "something's got to give," that "something" is usually classroom teachers or specialists and programs most likely to be categorized as "frills" — an athletic program here, an instrumental music course there, advanced courses in math or science in one district, reading clinics or foreign language programs for elementary pupils in another.

Fiscal conservatism settles gloomily over once-innovative school boards. And, at the same time, they are told by state and federal legislatures and courts that they must provide special services for disadvantaged, handicapped, non-English-speaking and gifted youngsters. Less money and more demands start the candle wicks flaming at both ends, with school boards awaiting their own inevitable turn as they sit in the middle.

Much as they may sincerely want to provide equal educational opportunities for all the youngsters in their district, board members and administrators begin to feel they are caught in a vise. There is insufficient money to provide services that have long been part of the school system. Costs are racing ahead of revenues. The taxpaying public rebels at paying more to educate fewer students. Staff members become edgy about the security of their jobs. Yet the demands on the schools proliferate.

Hardest hit by these pressures is the small school district. At the administrative level, the small district has little flexibility to accommodate the changing situation. Budgets in small districts have almost no fat to carve away. Small schools prevail; when their enrollments become even smaller, there are fewer ways to economize. Consider the Brackett Independent School District in Brackettville, Tex.: although it reported stable enrollments "at this time," it has 575 students in a county unit covering 1,370 square miles. If enrollments decline, where will it make consolidations? Large districts can reduce administrative and supervisory staffs and run the larger schools more efficiently. Small districts have little choice but to reduce teaching staffs and programs.

Somehow, through the first stages of declining enrollment, the idea begins to take hold that the schools simply are not going to be able to perform all the miracles asked for. One of the most subtle yet penetrating effects of declining enrollment is a change of attitude toward education as an institution.

The Social Scientists' View

The exhilarating period of growth in education in the 1950s and early 1960s has been characterized as the era of the "four Bs": building, bond issues, buses and budgets. By contrast, the present situation of decline focuses on the "four Rs": the pared-down, back-to-basics emphasis on the old readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic — plus real estate. How can economic sense be made out of all those underused facilities? The optimism of growth changes to the pessimism of decline, and *decline* is a decidedly negative word in the mental vocabulary of most Americans.

Social scientists see the situation as a typical example of the predictable phases of a social institution. The schools, it appears, have entered the unhappy "third period."

The first phase is *dynamic growth*, characterized by self-confidence and expansion. The institution can solve any problem it confronts, and "the impossible takes only a little longer." Is the country behind in the space race? Pass the National Defense Education Act, and the schools will produce the necessary scientists. Do young people need education about sex, drugs, driving, preserving the environment or dealing with the corporate structure? Tack some more courses onto the curriculum, and the kids will learn. Has the education of whole segments of our population been neglected? Bring them in – schools can do anything.

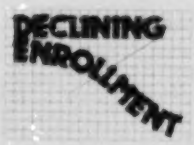
The second phase is *conflict*. Self-confidence changes to self-doubt. The wand was waved, but the problems did not vanish. New solutions are tried, but work no better. The problems persist. Not only are the schools incapable of solving all of society's problems, but word leaks out that they are graduating large numbers of students who cannot read well enough to perform the basic functions of society. Being a school public relations officer in the late 1960s, when the second phase began, meant standing constant duty at the dike and trying to hold back the flood of criticism that was surging at the educational system.

The third phase is *decline*. In a country where "bigger" has always meant "better," decline is an unfortunate situation. The institution retreats, retrenches and tries to find a level at which it can again produce successfully. But "decline" is "failure" in too many minds, both within and outside the educational profession. Communities on the decline face the administrators of school systems on the decline, and neither group has much heart for dealing with the issue. There is an urge to deny the inevitable and hope that, if ignored, it will go away.

It need not be that way. Those who have met the issues with constructive solutions have found that decline is not entirely negative in its results. It is not necessarily a situation only of neglect, reduced expectations, indifference, passivity and stagnation. Strong leadership is the necessary ingredient for showing both educators and the communities they serve that there are potential benefits in a seemingly bleak situation. There are possibilities for better educational programs, more solid structures and improved services. There are opportunities to throw off any number of unworkable, unnecessary or ineffective elements and retain only the best. There is room for improvement.

Communities that retain the mind-set that decline is all bad view any solution as a step backward. Communities that accept decline as a natural – *and not necessarily permanent* – phase in their evolution have found it possible not only to accept but even to welcome any of the effects declining enrollment has on their schools.

Chapter 2.



Making Accurate Projects

No school planning officer should feel chagrin at having missed the boat in predicting declining enrollment. The national experts were standing on the same pier.

The national birth rate started dipping around 1958; 10 years later few local educators and equally few professional demographers were thinking about anything close to decline. Anyone who noticed the dip thought it was merely a temporary aberration.

In 1962, the chief of the projections section at the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) prepared a circular predicting nationwide school enrollments to 1980. He predicted an average annual enrollment growth of 1 to 1.5 million. Between 1970 and 1980, he expected increases of between 12 and 17 million students. Current USOE predictions are for a loss of close to 6 million in this decade. Hedging from predictions based on "reasonable assumptions concerning fertility rates," the USOE official estimated the "lower limit" of enrollments as a growth of only 12% in the 20 years between 1960 and 1980. Projections now put that increase well below the "lower limit" – at less than 8%. Moving up just four years and taking the 20-year period 1964-84, projections are for a net loss of about 6% in total school enrollment.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census produced some population projections in 1955 based on varying assumptions of birth rates. The different projections were labeled Series AA (continuation of then-high rates) to Series C (drop to prewar levels). In 1972, the bureau had to add three new series – D, E and F – to account for the unheralded declines already manifested in birth and fertility rates. In 1975, the bureau scrapped the letter series entirely; it is now using Series I, II, and III. Series II is what the bureau assumes to be the most valid projection: it is set at an average fertility rate of 2.1 lifetime births per woman – or exactly replacement (no-growth) level. Series I, at 2.7 children per woman, and Series III, at 1.7 children per woman, were set to allow for projections within a one-child deviation from the bureau's most reasonable assumption.

Predicting what human beings will do is an "iffy" business, at best. Predicting beyond the short range is simply guessing at numerous unknowns. Even the experts failed miserably over the last 20 years. Nevertheless, any school district facing – or suspecting – enrollment declines must have some reliable projections with which to work. School officials who want to make plans to avoid being caught short need to start with reasonable predictions about district enrollments for at least the next several years. The best advice is to hire an expert. Although expertise has already proved to be no guarantee of success, lack of some solid knowledge about techniques of projecting is certain to produce nothing more than guesses.

Nationwide Projections

The next step is to look at the projections being made for the nation as a whole. Rarely will any individual school district conform exactly to national patterns, but sooner or later national trends will make some kind of impact on a local area.

The most important national projection is for a rise in births in the late 1970s. The fertility rate is still pegged at the two-child family. But those young women born in the baby boom, who have postponed childbearing for college, careers and later marriages, are still planning on having children. And there are a lot of them. A low number of births per thousand women can be offset by the existence of many thousands of women.

In 1950, there were about 20 million females in the United States ages 18 to 34. In 1960, the number was closer to 18 million. Numbers of births were high during those years. By 1970, women of the ages 18 to 34 numbered almost 25 million; by 1974, around 28 million. Projections of

this age group to 1980 and 1985 are quite solid: the females who will comprise the group are living now and can be counted. They will number about 33 million in 1980 and about 34 million in 1985. Even at their projected low average lifetime fertility rate of 2.1 children, they should – by their very numbers – produce an upswing in numbers of births per year.

The census bureau estimates the upswing to occur around the end of the 1970s. Five years later, those children will start to school. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) projects a rise in total school enrollment in 1984. It projects a rise in *elementary* school enrollment to begin around 1982. At that time, secondary school enrollment will still be falling and will continue to do so through the 1980s.

The census bureau continues its projections of increases in births until 1989. In July 1974, the population under five years of age was 16.3 million. Estimates on the basis of Series II show that the decline in this group would reach a low of 15.6 million in July 1977; the number rises to 16 million in 1978, 16.5 million in 1979, 17.2 million in 1980 and 17.9 million in 1981. The peak of 20.2 million is expected in 1988. Slight drops occur in succeeding years until the projection reaches 18.4 million in 2000. Even the low Series III projection gives a rise in the under-five population by 1982, with a peak of 16.5 million in 1987.

School officials lived blissfully through the 1950s and 1960s with a mind-set pegged to growth. They became adept at dealing with the problems of growth – from getting bond issues passed to squeezing another class into a bursting building to luring instructional personnel to their districts.

Many school officials have now made the painful transformation to a mind-set of decline. They admit they were caught short by the suddenness of the reversal, and they are learning to cope with problems quite different – even opposite – from the ones they faced in earlier years. Decline, however, is not likely to last indefinitely. Plans and attitudes geared to continued decline may prove to be as unsuited to reality as were the ideas predicated on endless growth that failed school systems so miserably when that growth stopped.

Furthermore, school officials are likely to be dealing with both growth and decline *at the same time* for many years to come. As the numbers of births per year start to rise, the impact will be felt at the early elementary levels. At that time, the declining numbers of students now in elementary grades will be moving through the secondary grades. This projection, too, is quite firm, because it is based on a count of children already living. NCES projected peaks in secondary school enrollment in 1975 and 1976, then continued decline through 1984. The census bureau projects, on the basis of Series II, that the age group 10 to 19 will fall from 41.5 million in July 1974 to 40.3 million in July 1977 to 38.4 million in July 1980. The projected drop continues annually, to a low of 34.1 million in 1987. The number rises to 34.3 million in 1988, but returns to 41.5 million only by the year 2000.

Estimating the eventual enrollment of those under five years of age can be done with a high degree of accuracy. Compulsory attendance laws provide nearly saturation enrollment of the population aged 6 to 15. In 1974, 94.2% of 5- and 6-year-olds and 99.3% of children ages 7 to 13 were enrolled in school; 92.9% of those ages 14 to 17 were enrolled. School officials can safely count on enrolling their entire population from the year schooling becomes compulsory in their state to age 14 or 15. After that, additional factors – such as economic conditions and dropout rates – must be weighed. But the saturation enrollment includes all schools, and allowances must be made for the proportions attending public and nonpublic schools.

It is safe to assume that the population curve will continue to flow in peaks and valleys. Today, a low point for elementary enrollments is paired with bulges at the secondary level. In the 1980s, the reverse is predicted.

The Old Methods Didn't Work

The critical step for the local school district making enrollment projections is to devise a method by which to make accurate predictions about the local area. But just as the census bureau and USOE were forced to change their methods in the light of changed conditions nationwide, so have local planners learned that their old, reliable means of forecasting are not working in the current situation.

One of the most popular methods of projecting enrollment has been a system based on moving enrollments from grade to grade, year by year. Often, the planner starts with a count of live births (and perhaps migration into the area) in order to determine the kindergarten or grade 1 enrollment

five or six years later, then moves this group through the grades in each successive year, based on past experience with the numbers retained from grade to grade. This method is usually known as cohort-survival, cohort-retention or straight-line projection. Of the 276 districts responding to the *Education U.S.A.* survey, 30 reported using this method exclusively and another 45 use it in combination with other techniques.

A census count, either done locally or extrapolated from state or national figures, is the sole method used by 38 districts and one of a combination of methods for 26. The local birth rate is the only statistic reported in use by 14 districts; 56 respondents use birth rate along with other factors. Seven school systems rely solely on determining the number of students yielded by each housing unit in the district; 23 more use housing yields as one of several projection techniques.

Charting actual and potential industrial growth is the single yardstick applied by 11 school systems, and 18 more consider this factor along with others. Six districts base their projections entirely on figures provided by the state; six report use of state figures as one of several measurements.

The next questions in the survey were more revealing of the problem: "Do present population and movement trends correspond to projections made five years ago? In what ways are they different?" The respondents split almost exactly down the middle: 126 said their projections were accurate; 124 reported current enrollments to be different from those projected; 26 either did not answer or did not know. Several districts replied that their projections of 10 years ago would not hold today but that they have been using new computation methods in the last five years.

Of those reporting accurate projections, 80 had projected decline and 46 had forecast stable or increasing enrollments. Among the districts reporting inaccuracies, 77 said their enrollments were down instead of up or down more than projected; 19 said the figures were not up as much as expected; 14 said enrollments were not down as much as expected; and 14 said enrollments went up instead of down or up more than projected.

TECHNIQUES FOR LOCAL PROJECTIONS

A local district with a history of projecting enrollments accurately through both growth and decline can continue to use whatever techniques it has used in the past. Many school districts, however, found that the methods that were accurate for projecting growth are inaccurate in a time of decline. The problem can be reduced to a simple question: How many children are there and where do they live? Finding the correct answers is not so simple.

The greater the number of relevant factors on which a district can obtain reliable statistics, the more accurate will be the projection. Eighty-five of the districts reporting inaccurate projections made five years previously had based those projections on a single factor; only 39 districts using multiple factors reported inaccuracies. Those reporting accurate projections were split evenly: 63 used one factor and 63 used several.

Which factors should be included? The best answer must be somewhat vague: whatever is relevant to the particular local area. The Duval County (Fla.) school board predicted stability on the basis of live births; it was unprepared for growth from migration. District 1 in Erie, Ill., used an area census and projected declines; it is now receiving a "population overflow" from nearby urban areas. Unified School District No. 352, in Goodland, Kan., used a local census but did not anticipate new housing developments and trailer parks.

A respondent from rural Madison, Kan., wrote: "The projections made five years ago indicated we would slowly lose population. The trend held true until this year, when enrollment increased by 5%. Although we have no supporting data, we feel the reason is loss of city-based jobs and dissatisfaction with city living." Several districts reported failure to take into account the effects of a shaky economy in the early and mid-1970s, some of which were loss of industry, higher mortgage rates, a slowdown in home building and generally less movement in and out of existing homes. These districts were hit by unexpected declines.

The Cohort-Survival Method

If school planners take into account a sufficient number of variables affecting enrollment, the cohort-survival method can be a useful technique. The experts caution that this method is more reliable in times of growth than in times of decline and that its results can be assumed valid only for short-term predictions of a maximum of five to six years.

A "cohort" is the enrollment in a grade for a given year. Planners chart the proportion of the

cohort that moves from grade to grade in each succeeding year. If the number "surviving" from, say, grade 3 to grade 4 is less than the previous year's enrollment in grade 3, the reduction may be caused by any combination of deaths, dropouts, pupils held back, transfers to private schools and net migration out of the district. If the number is greater, the causes may be transfers from private schools, net migration into the district and positive promotional policies of the schools.

Estimates of first-year enrollments are taken from statistics of live births in the area. (One reason this method is valid only for the short range is that a five- or six-year projection relies on actual births; for predictions further into the future, the planner must get into the more tricky business of estimating births.) Assuming compulsory attendance in grade 1 at age 6, the live births of six years before are moved into the first-grade cohort, with appropriate adjustments for deaths, migration into or out of the district and enrollment in private schools. Noncompulsory kindergarten enrollments are worked backward from the grade 1 cohort, based on previous experience with the percentage of first graders who attend kindergarten.

There are a number of detailed descriptions available for using the cohort-survival method. One was prepared by the New York State Education Dept., *Procedures for Projecting School District Enrollment*. It contains the following warning: "The underlying assumption of the model's applicability is that factors influencing enrollment except births will display future patterns consistent with past patterns. This assumption suggests, for instance, that applying the model to a district experiencing unusual growth would be inappropriate." The publication also summarizes research into the accuracy of the method, concluding that it is least accurate in areas with a population under 2,500 (where the tendency is to overestimate the enrollments), in areas with a high degree of migration and in areas experiencing relatively large changes in enrollments. A 1976 research report on declining enrollment by the National School Boards Assn. and a 1974 handbook by the American Assn. of School Administrators also contain step-by-step procedures for using the cohort-survival method.

Housing Unit Yields

Predicting enrollment from housing unit yields is more complicated, but it provides data on the geographic locations of declines and increases. Such data are especially important in large school systems and in districts where enrollment trends differ from school to school. Countywide and consolidated school districts, in particular, may find some areas hit by severe declines while others show increases. In some cases, these intradistrict trends may be significant, even while the enrollment for the district as a whole is relatively stable.

Planners using this method must first take an inventory of all the housing units in the school district and gather statistics on the average number of pupils yielded by each type of unit. Many districts have made inaccurate projections by basing them on new housing starts; they grossly overestimated enrollments if they failed to consider the type of housing being built. Owner-occupied, single-family dwellings generally yield the most children. Garden and high-rise apartments produce different averages, and the figures may differ still more depending on whether units within such buildings are rented or purchased. The average number of children yielded by each kind of dwelling unit also differs from one locality to another. For example, a comparison made a few years ago showed that high-rise apartments in a New York City suburb yielded two to three times as many school-age children as did high-rise apartments in a suburb of Washington, D.C.

Future construction must also be counted. Builders and developers, real estate agents, local zoning boards and utility companies can supply such information. Housing destruction – to build roads, for example – must be considered as well.

Communities undergoing substantial growth and communities where the enrollment fluctuates most as a result of changes in the work force (for example, areas with a high degree of federal activity) should use this method as at least one means of making projections. In combination with the cohort-survival method, it can provide a fairly reliable short-term prediction – especially if both methods produce similar results. If the results differ, however, it is almost impossible to determine which method is the more accurate one.

For two to five years in the future, predictions about new homes can be based on construction already begun, permits issued or development that is seriously contemplated. For long-range projections, this method becomes mostly judgmental. School planners must have the cooperation of those in the real estate field in order to use this method successfully. They must also know intimately the housing cycle of each community in

their district and the behavior of families in obtaining housing during different stages of their life cycle.

Inaccurate projections have resulted from this method when the yield per type of unit has changed drastically. When families continue to live in single-family homes after the children have grown, or when the birth rate declines, the yield will decline. When economic or social conditions change – a gasoline shortage, a sudden loss of an industry or a surge of interest in purchasing and restoring older homes – the attraction of certain areas for families may also change, and predictions made even a year or two previously can become hopelessly misleading.

The Nature of the District

William F. Keough, superintendent of the Bedford, Mass., schools and an authority on declining enrollment, has devised a series of questions to provide a profile of a school district's expected enrollment trends. These apply most accurately to school districts in suburban areas near major metropolitan centers. The currently accepted theory is that central cities may have already experienced their most severe declines and now face problems connected with the changing racial, ethnic and socioeconomic proportions of the school population. Rural areas, on the other hand, are witnessing a reversal of the trend towards decline because of both consolidation of districts and an unexpected pattern of increased migration to rural districts.

Keough offers five signals that warn of decline:

1. Is there a noticeable decrease in class size in the elementary schools?
2. Are schools no longer using special-purpose areas (stage, cafeteria, corridors) as classrooms?
3. Is there a decline in numbers at each grade level as a class moves through school? (Sometimes, the decline starts in one elementary grade for which cohort-retention ratio suddenly drops significantly, and declines consistently for two or three years.)
4. Do principals' requests for special services (instructional media centers, resource rooms, laboratories) reflect actual or potential empty classrooms?
5. Do specialist teachers have their own classrooms?

More *yes's* than *no's* suggest that the school district should take a closer look at factors influencing decline.

A district close to an urban area that burgeoned in the 1950s or 1960s; where real-estate values are increasing faster than the general market and are already beyond the reach of young families; where homeowners of 20 and 25 years are staying on; where new development – if any – is of units for senior citizens or high-cost complexes yielding few children, is a district experiencing (or on the verge of) declining enrollment. Typically, such districts were the first suburbs to feel the impact of the baby boom. During this country's massive activity in constructing roads, circumferential highways were built around the major urban areas, enclosing these suburbs. Keough calls them the "first-ring" communities and maintains that most are now experiencing decline. Today there are outer circumferentials and commuting routes; these are producing second- and third-ring communities that are still in varying stages of growth.

How do you confirm the fears? How do you know whether a community is growing older, rejuvenating or even just starting to develop? Real estate agents can tell you if there has been a drop in young families moving into an area. Commercial property brokers know if industries and corporations are moving in or out. State departments of commerce or development know about relocations of manufacturing or research centers. Local zoning boards have information on changes from residential to commercial and from single-family to multiunit development. State highway departments have data on new roads, which can mean loss of enrollment if houses will be demolished in the process, or increases if new developments will result. Local utilities (telephone, gas, electric) often have some of the most sophisticated projections of population; their data on current and expected installations are usually among the most accurate indicators of trends.

When local census data that was once reliable starts looking shaky, school planners need to supplement the information. Community groups can state if they are reducing services for children aged 5 to 12 because of lack of response. An increase in recreational and educational programs for adults and senior citizens is a sign of a rise in the average age of a population. Several data banks can provide statistics that enable a district to avoid

the tedious job of compiling figures from block and census tracts. Various authorities on declining enrollment recommend obtaining or reviewing the following:

- *The First-Count Tape* contains information on age, sex, race, housing characteristics and family composition for individual school districts and for each of the community subdistricts of 20 of the largest urban districts. (Available from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.)

- *The Reference Tape* defines the school district in terms of standard census units – census tracts and "block group" or enumeration districts – and provides data for subdistrict analysis on the level of these block groups. (Available from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.)

- *Maps on colored microfilm* show census "block groups" and tracts for each school district (9,000 districts of 300 or more students in 45 states). (Available from the National Audiovisual Center of the General Services Administration.)

- *School District "Fourth-Count Tape"* contains social and economic information, including income, educational level, enrollment, mobility (five-year and one-year) and occupation. This is available both for the total population and for black and Spanish-Americans separately. Tapes are on microfiche and were taken from the 1970 census. (Available from the National Center for Education Statistics.)

A local preschool census, when taken accurately, is essential. Some states require it; others have dropped it. It remains, however, one of the few methods available to update the figures on live births collected five to six years previously. The smaller the area for which projections are being made, the less accurate the projections are likely to be. The nationwide forecasts stand the best chance of holding firm, at least for five to 10 years. Predictions for an entire state will be more reliable than those for a single local district. Some experts recommend that local planners include in their computations a consideration of state census figures and the historical trends of the percentage of the state's total school-age population enrolled in the local area. The more years for which historical data are available, the more reliable will be the projections. On the other hand, results will be least accurate in areas that have experienced great fluctuations in recent years.

Forecasters Must Be Omniscient

Forecasters of enrollment trends, in short, must be omniscient. They need to be able to spot factors likely to affect enrollment in their district with its own particular characteristics. A court-ordered desegregation plan – or even a district-imposed shifting of attendance patterns for any reason – should send public school officials to the private schools to see what effects such changes have on their enrollments. Fourteen of the districts surveyed by *Education U.S.A.* listed "race" or "desegregation" as a reason for losing families from the district. Just months before receiving its Supreme Court decision, the Mount Pleasant School District in Wilmington, Del., responded: "More than the usual number of students have transferred to private or parochial schools due to the impending decision in the Wilmington desegregation case." But surprises can come from any number of directions. The civilian population of North Kingstown, R.I., has been increasingly continually, but the school enrollment declined from 7,500 to 5,300 in two years when the naval complex there was closed, leaving more than 1,000 military housing units vacant.

A second- or third-ring suburban community, a suburb of a city undergoing desegregation or a rural area within 30 to 40 miles of a town of 50,000 population, especially in the South or Southwest, can probably expect enrollments to rise for the next few years. A close-in suburb, a city of 500,000 or more population, a district under a court-ordered desegregation plan or a rural area not close to a town of at least 50,000 population, especially in one of the Northern industrial states, will probably see its enrollment decline or "bottom out" in the near future. But there will be many exceptions, and school planners need to know the where and why of areas that do not make textbook cases. These broad generalizations can be confirmed or refuted by a conscientious approach to gathering data and predicting enrollment trends.

Chapter 3.

Possibilities and Alternatives

Declining enrollment need not be a totally negative situation. Many school districts have found in it great potential for improving the quality of their educational program. Those that have are the ones that recognized the possibilities from the early stages of decline. Suddenly, there is room – and time – to breathe. The days of cramming a million more students into the schools each year, of searching frantically for another "warm body" to stand in front of too many students and try to teach, and of scrambling to get bond issues passed left few moments and little energy for stepping back and asking, "Where are we going?"

In a nation that has always equated "bigger" with "better," "smaller" tends to be thought of as "worse." Many school officials refused to believe the early warnings, hoping if they ignored the situation it – and all of its negative implications – would simply go away. By the time they were ready to face facts, the overwhelming problems to be addressed were numbers and dollars. And then there was little time for long-range educational considerations.

The school systems of Montgomery County, Md., and Great Neck, N.Y., are among those that have long been considered "lighthouse" districts. Their superior educational programs have been held up as models for many years. Both districts recently went through the process of dealing with declining enrollment. Although the process was markedly different in each district, both suffered from a situation in which educational considerations became secondary to politics, dollars and numbers. When considerations reach that point, educational improvement is – at least temporarily – suspended. (See pp. 61-64 for a case study of Montgomery County and pp. 58-60 for Great Neck.)

A school system that stands still moves backward. The first stages of declining enrollment present opportunities for moving ahead educationally by reviewing goals and planning. Craig Currie, superintendent of the Mercer Island, Wash., schools, told participants in a National Academy for School Executives (NASE) institute, "Declining enrollment can be either an educational disaster or an educational renaissance. After the double sessions are eliminated, after classes are returned from the gymnasium and the stage to their own classrooms and after the portable partitions and classrooms are taken down, there are many benefits to be realized."

Capitalizing on Decline

First comes the glorious feeling of space. At last, special teachers can have their own rooms for music, art, reading, science and math. Vocational and career education can have a place to call their own. Elementary schools can have libraries and instructional media centers. The faculty can have a lounge; the administration can have some work and storage space. Guidance counselors and school psychologists no longer need to search for a place to hang their hats.

While the boom period had its innovations, with all the money pouring in and all those new facilities being built, the approach was largely of the band-wagon variety. Often new ideas were tried with little more thought than "everyone's doing it." Many – such as year-round schools and nongraded classrooms – suffered in the process.

Now there is space and time to try innovative ideas that have been around for awhile but had no place to go in an overcrowded school system – magnet programs, parent volunteers, exciting electives, resource rooms for enrichment and remediation, diagnostic centers and middle schools. There is room for faculty, parents and students to spread out and work on pet projects. Programs for gifted, handicapped or non-English-speaking students no longer need to be shunted aside. Early childhood

programs can be established; full-day kindergartens can be instituted. Individualized instruction can turn from a watchword into a reality.

Class size can be reduced. Currie told the participants in the NASF institute, "We have not had the chance to operate with reduced class size long enough to know whether it makes any difference in the cognitive area. But many of our academic problems in today's high schools may have been caused by the crowded elementary classrooms of a few years ago. We ought to at least give it a chance to see if reduced class size in elementary grades can make a difference – and we'd get a big cheer from the teachers' associations."

Currie made some further recommendations on the kind of rethinking that can be prompted by declining enrollment. One area to be explored, he said, is expanding the age range for which a school provides services – including both adult programs that have largely been left to community colleges and prekindergarten programs for children age 4 and younger. Special education, retraining teachers, consolidating school districts and reorganizing or restructuring the school year are other possibilities.

Closing schools is usually considered the most drastic action that can be taken to solve the problem of surplus space produced by declining enrollment. Districts that have retained obsolete facilities long past the day of respectable use, however, have welcomed decreases in student numbers as an opportunity to get rid of such buildings. Often students, staff and community are in unanimous agreement that "the old firetrap should have been razed 30 years ago." The New York City school system produced a list of 73 schools in January 1976 from which to select 50 for potential closing over a two-year period. Eight of the schools had been built before the turn of the century (the oldest, in 1890) and 33 others were more than 50 years old.

In some cases, declining enrollment offers the perfect opportunity to make long-needed repairs and renovations to facilities. With students placed in every nook of a district's facilities, where can they be put when there is maintenance work to be done? Many districts have found that declining enrollment opens up one facility to be used while others undergo renovation, or at least that enough classroom space becomes available to disperse pupils temporarily while their school receives a face-lifting. School officials in Peabody, Mass., found that enrollment decline enabled them to replace two old schools with one new and more modern one.

The early stages of declining enrollment are also the best time to develop more flexible contracts with the staff of the district. By the time the problem reaches the point of being all dollars and numbers, job security can become the teachers' overriding concern. The first appearance of warning signs is the time to make certain the district will not soon be overstaffed and forced either to issue termination notices or to retain surplus staff entrenched with rigid contracts. Superintendents and board members who have been through this process warn that negotiations should not center on *whether* the school system may reduce its staff but on *how* the reduction can be effected in fairness to all. Contract provisions negotiated at this point can allow the district to make educationally sound choices later, knowing it has some options in terms of flexible staffing.

Noncertified personnel working as full-time teachers are generally the first to be pared from the employment rolls of a school district with fewer students. If the potential effects of declining enrollment are recognized early, normal attrition, leaves and retirement can be used to reduce staff size. Additional hiring should be done only with the greatest of caution. Incentives for early retirement can be worked into contracts.

When declines occur primarily because of a drop in the birth rate, elementary enrollment drops while secondary schools continue to have increases. If census bureau predictions hold, school districts will face the reverse pattern in the 1980s. Instead of dismissing teachers outright, the district can use as a negotiable item the possibility of retraining teachers for reassignment to teach at the levels where enrollments are increasing. Similarly, while a district may need fewer regular classroom teachers, it may find increased need for teachers with credentials in special education, bilingual education, early childhood programs or any of a number of specialized areas. Contracts can provide for the retraining of experienced teachers on the district staff. "Most teachers," says one veteran observer, "would rather retrain than lose their jobs."

Economizing by Planning

As enrollment continues to decline, the surplus space begins to outrun the district's educational needs. Revenues diminish and it becomes difficult to justify the expense of maintaining all that

Anticipate These Trouble Spots

When a school district of any size from the largest to the smallest anticipates large declines in enrollment, there are a number of problems it must recognize and plan for, according to a recent research report from the National School Boards Assn. The problems can be grouped in four categories as shown below:

FINANCIAL

- Reduced federal funding for special programs
- Reduced state appropriations based on average daily attendance
- Reduced local tax base
- Increased costs from higher teacher-pupil ratios; facility/maintenance-pupil ratios
- Increased (or decreased) need for use of transportation

SPACE

- Excess buildings
- Excess rooms in yet-needed buildings
- Excess space/land purchased during predecline period

MANPOWER

- Oversupply of teachers
- Inability or unwillingness of other districts to absorb unneeded teachers
- Contract agreements making reductions in force either difficult or impossible
- "Last-hired – first-fired" policies disrupting the racial or program balance of the staff
- Demands for wage increases despite reduced income from taxes and other sources

SOCIAL

- Disruption of community because of school closures
- Parent unwillingness to send children farther from home to school
- Inability of taxpayers to understand increasing costs despite lower enrollment
- Loss of school board support due to district boundary changes
- Community disappointment with school management due to declining enrollment problems

unnecessary space. Classes in some schools become smaller than what anyone would consider educationally sound. Responses to the *Education U.S.A.* survey revealed that many districts, caught by surprise and without plans for dealing with such conditions, are forced into austerities. Fewer programs are offered, with fewer resources, as pennies are pinched haphazardly in an attempt to avoid deficits. Those innovative electives, which may have made a school system outstanding and attractive, are usually the first to go.

Pressure from parents to keep schools open is pitted against pressure from community residents without school-age children to close schools in order to effect economies. Districts in which declines are occurring unevenly, sometimes coupled with increases in some areas, have resorted to adjusting attendance boundaries as a first remedy. Of the districts surveyed, 24 reported changing attendance boundaries as a way of equalizing both enrollment and use of facilities. Others have consolidated classes within schools – either by reducing the number of classes at one grade level or by combining classes of two or more grade levels. These measures serve, of course, to reverse the trend toward lower pupil/teacher ratios.

In the Highline Public Schools in Seattle, Wash., the preferred pattern has been first to cut "things" – supplies, materials, equipment – and only last to take steps that increase class size. When Highline ran out of "things" to cut and got to "people," the casualties were librarians, extracurricular activities, teachers' planning periods and the sixth subject on high school students' schedules.

Highline has also economized by assigning one principal to two schools with enrollments under 250 each or by assigning the principal of one building to part-time teaching duties. Doyle Winter, administrative assistant in the Seattle district, suggests that the first plan is better because a principal confined to a classroom cannot be reached to deal with administrative problems. Dual-building principals are given extra pay for the extra effort involved, and it is suggested that the two buildings be linked with a common telephone line so that the principal can always be reached by or at either school.

Other districts have looked to justify retaining all that space by filling it with educational activities of one sort or another. When the space is used by groups outside the school system, there are often possibilities of revenues for leasing the space – if state and local laws allow it.

There is also what has become almost a classic story of making a building so indispensable that the school board could not consider its closing. The principal of Fairlington Elementary School in Arlington, Va., saw her enrollment drop from 440 to 225. She first turned space over to a play school, then invited the recreation department to use the school for some of its programs and then reserved space for use by a senior citizens group. A community theatre and several other local organizations soon joined in using the school's facilities. Before long, talk of closing the school ceased, and some began to wonder if perhaps it needed an addition.

A 800-student junior high school in Arlington, Va., uses about half its capacity in a districtwide alternative program. The rest of the building is used by a Montessori school (run by the district but with a tuition charge to parents) and adult education courses. A community center has now been added to the site, connected to the school so as to make use of its gymnasium, food service areas and auditorium. In building the center, the recreation department provided a playground and tennis courts, available for use by the school.

Other schools in Arlington house museums, day-care centers, drama workshops, recreational programs, alternative educational programs, lunch programs for senior citizens, branches of the public library and youth programs. The major disadvantage is that the district could spend little to remodel the facilities, so the user groups have to make do with what exists.

The Baltimore County (Md.) Public Schools had been experiencing declines for at least three years before some kind of plan was sought for using surplus space. A meeting of administrators, supervisors and principals early in 1976 was admittedly the first attempt to address the problem, and the atmosphere was already one of fear of staff cutbacks. A number of suggestions emerged for filling available space with educational activities, especially those that require the services of school staff: programs for senior citizens, who could also be recruited as volunteers to work with students; daycare centers that might use school staff and students in child development courses; provisions for allowing adults to audit regular school courses; minicourses for adults during the school day, to be based on the selection by the participants of offerings by district teachers in home economics, instrumental music, art, dance, writing, reading discussion groups, foreign language and the like; alcohol and drug abuse programs, using the school counseling services; film and lecture series for all

ages, including the students; and small-group instruction, student tutors, aides and flexible classes.

By the time enrollments have declined to the point of creating stretching space, school districts often become quite creative in finding ways to fill it. Some have sought to bus students from nearby districts that are overcrowded. Others have investigated consolidating with nearby districts. Some look for relief from state legislatures. According to a survey by the National School Boards Assn., the patterns are not uniform. "Reduced class size is far more frequent in small districts, whereas sale and lease of building and property is more frequent in middle-sized and large districts. Pressure to keep schools open is most intense in middle-sized districts, as is the frequency of efforts to change attendance boundaries. Efforts to gain legislative assistance are most frequent in small districts. Reduced hiring and layoffs, remodeling of facilities, negotiation of job security, expansion of programs and pressure to close schools are uniform across all district sizes. Busing students from other districts happens almost exclusively in the largest districts," according to the survey.

Whatever the remedies used, they should be part of a plan formulated as early as possible. The plan should start with a rethinking of educational goals for the entire school system. Reorganization or restructuring (a middle school? early childhood programs? attendance centers for grades 7 and 8? alternative or model schools?) should be contemplated on the basis of these goals, as should additional or innovative services to be offered in freed space. The need to economize in the areas of both services and staff should be addressed over a period of years and **not** met with crisis solutions.

Declines at the elementary school level demand plans for managing those declines when they reach the secondary schools. A typical high school in a large district, for example, may offer 170 courses and actually run about 150 each year. Declining enrollment will mean either reducing the number of offerings or changing school policy to allow for serving smaller numbers of students. The district might consider moving in one of the following directions: either establishing small, specialized schools or consolidating adjacent schools into a large and comprehensive high school.

Districts that grew top-heavy with administrators during boom periods need to plan for reducing central office staff. In most cases, such staff is not protected by tenure, as is the instructional staff. The paring process is more humane, however, when it can be accomplished through normal attrition over a period of years as well as by reassigning central staff to the field to replace retiring or resigning principals and supervisors, as has been done in the San Francisco school system.

Long-range plans are necessary, too, for considerations of ethnic and socioeconomic balance. Consolidating schools may seem to be a logical response to declining enrollment. Several districts have been hit by mass defections, however, when a school's population has suddenly taken on a new "mix." More thoughtful planning can sometimes allow a gradual readjustment of attendance boundaries, which is less likely to produce emotional reactions in the communities involved.

Similarly, drastic staff reduction measures taken solely on the basis of seniority may wipe out any gains made in hiring or promoting minorities and women. Needed specialists may have less rank than unneeded general classroom teachers. Attention paid early to such factors and negotiations carried on before the situation becomes threatening can produce a plan that not only retains a balanced staff but is also accepted (even if not with unbounded enthusiasm) by all concerned.

Involve the Public—Early

Early planning provides the opportunity for an essential process — involving and informing the public. A school district may decide, for example, that at a certain point in enrollment decline it will consolidate classes in elementary schools to multi-age groupings and move to a team-teaching, non-graded approach. Such an approach may actually be more responsive to the educational needs of the district than is the traditional graded, self-contained structure. If parents are involved in and informed of such plans, they will be less likely to object to changes made on the basis of what appears to be merely administrative expediency.

When decline hits suddenly and unexpectedly, school officials may run scared and tend to make decisions in terms of dollars and numbers. If the problem was foreseen and plans were made on the basis of educational considerations, the decisions will be far more acceptable to a community concerned about the education of its children. *Education U.S.A.* asked respondents to its survey to list the factors on which they had based decisions to solve the problem of declining enrollment: 42 considered only dollar savings; 38 relied on better use of educational resources; 9 thought in terms of educational trade-offs (e.g., close one

school in order to maintain the level of instructional services at others); 27 were motivated by a combination of these. More than 30 additional factors were reportedly taken into account – chiefly racial balance, legal considerations and community acceptance.

Considerations for Closing

Eventually, enrollment declines may reach the point at which the only logical solution is to close one or more schools. Twelve districts responded to the *Education U.S.A.* survey that they had considered alternatives to closing but had rejected them. The reason, in almost all cases, was that no other alternative produced sufficient savings.

The decision to close schools will have profound effects on the school systems and the communities involved. The effects will differ from one community to another, depending on the particular characteristics of each area. But the decision for any community will be valid only if arrived at according to a logical plan. In its publication, *Fewer Pupils/Surplus Space*, the Educational Facilities Laboratories (EFL) presents such a plan, which has been used successfully by many school districts throughout the country. It contains the essential steps in reaching a justifiable decision on how to deal with enrollment declines:

- A set of **agreed-on goals**, with specific objectives spelled out for each.
- A **factual base** defining the "givens" upon which the plan can be developed. In the case of a plan for facility use, this base includes enrollments and their projections; schools, their location, capacity and general level of adequacy; community changes affecting the location of people and the composition of their groupings; and a "picture" of the physical structure of the district. Cost data on new construction and/or renovation may also be required.
- An **analysis** of the factual data. This is an exercise in fitting the numbers – pupils and schools – together and of arranging them in their physical setting.
- A set of **possible solutions**: alternative grade organizations, patterns of school use, abandonment for outmoded and/or unsafe schools and needed new construction or closings (or both).
- A **choice among alternatives** for a preferred course of action; a justification for the alternative selected; the preparation of the time sequence for the action to be taken; and a cost analysis of the implications of the selected plan as against alternative options.

Communities with a plan are noticeably more successful in closing schools than are those who simply use school closing as the final panic button.

The experience of dealing with declining enrollment has produced some elaborations on this plan. The second step is perhaps the most critical element – gathering a factual base for proceeding toward a decision. William Keough and Katherine Eisenberger developed a "facilities usage criteria test" for assessing a school's potential for closing, which appeared in *Declining Enrollment: What To Do*, published by the American Assn. of School Administrators, and which has been reported to be helpful by a number of school districts:

Closing a school would mean:

1. Keeping students relatively close to their neighborhood.
2. Keeping students from crossing major physical barriers.
3. Maintaining a similar socioeconomic, racial and ethnic mix.
4. Closing the school with the lowest enrollment.
5. Closing the oldest school with the weakest academic performance record.
6. Closing the least educationally flexible building.
7. Closing the "high-cost" maintenance/capital outlay building.
8. Closing a building that can be recycled.
9. Closing the building that requires the *least* additional cost in districtwide transportation.

And Now You Have Room

Respondents to the *Education U.S.A.* survey reported a variety of uses for new-found space. Among the most popular are the following:

- Room for special programs
  - √ music
  - √ art
  - √ vocational education
  - √ reading centers
  - √ science
  - √ elementary school library and instructional media
  - √ math centers
  - √ bilingual education
  - √ career education
  - √ more electives in secondary school
- Special education (either separate rooms for special programs or enlarged rooms to mainstream handicapped pupils)
- Administrative offices, supply center
- Adult and senior citizen programs
- Community uses
- Kindergarten
- Elementary school classrooms used for secondary school overflow
- Alternative programs
  - √ magnet schools
  - √ year-round school
- Cooperative programs
- Community college courses
- Faculty lounge
- Compensatory (Title I) programs
- Day care

10. Closing the building most in keeping with the recommendations of the district's task force on declining enrollment.

The task force on declining enrollment of the Highline school district in Seattle produced yet another set of criteria, assigning each category a weighting factor:

- **Educational adequacy** (20%) – the ability of the facility to meet the requirements of a good instructional program, including needs for capital improvement, capacity as related to program and availability of special-purpose areas.
- **Operational costs** (20%) – the costs of running the building that remain constant regardless of enrollment (utilities, maintenance and supplies, administrative and custodial salaries).
- **Enrollment** (13%) – number of students currently enrolled, ratio of enrollment to capacity, ability of the school to absorb an increase in enrollment of at least 10%.
- **Percentage of enrollment decline** (10%) – rate of decrease over previous four years, giving schools with the most stable figures the highest rating.
- **Environmental impact** (10%) – noise from the airport in the middle of the Highline district was the key factor; other environmental considerations apply in other districts.
- **Alternate use** (10%) – adaptability of building and site to partial or complete noneducational use.
- **Modernization potential** (7%) – ease of renovation, considering general plan, structural components and heating and ventilation systems.
- **Capacity** (7%) – 350 students was considered optimum.
- **Traffic and safety** (3%) – major freeways or arterials that created hazards for students walking to school.

Other districts may regard different factors as important for consideration, and different weights may be applied to the factors selected. (The models above represent the *objective* considerations that go into a decision to close schools. As the chapters will show, *subjective* considerations also play an important part in the process of finding solutions to shrinking enrollments.)

What To Do with Closed Schools

The decision to close one or more schools is not the final step of the process. The district should formulate plans for the building's future use *at the same time.*

Closing a school can be devastating to its residential neighborhood. The children and adult residents are likely to feel the great psychological impact of walking by a boarded-up building that was once the center of the neighborhood's activity. Furthermore, enrollment declines may well reverse in many districts within 10 years. What will happen when the district again needs additional facilities? Will communities that have undergone the trauma of having their schools closed be supportive of capital outlays and bond issues just a few years hence?

At least four rules of thumb emerge:

- Don't get rid of a school that the district can lease or retain for its own use in other ways.
- Don't leave a building idle any longer than absolutely necessary.
- Involve members of the community in the process of planning for a closed school's future use and give them veto power over uses they find unacceptable.
- Convert the building to uses as close to and compatible with its original educational function as possible.

Many districts find uses within the school system for facilities that no longer serve as neighborhood schools. Conversion to a special education, vocational education, diagnostic, adult education or resource center or for use by federally funded educational projects keeps the building within the district and serving an educational function that is generally most appealing to the surrounding neighborhood. The facility is, after all,

as close to still being a school as the residents could have wished. Using it for administrative offices or as an instructional media supply center may be the next best choices.

Simply "mothballing" a school for possible future use, because the costs of replacement at a later date could be prohibitive, has major disadvantages. Vandalism is an ever-present threat. The school system retains the burden of expenses for at least minimal maintenance and for paying off any debt service.

Sometimes, declining enrollment leaves a district with sites acquired for schools but never developed. Now the schools are not needed. The district might retain the site and develop it as a playfield, environmental education center or farm or garden area. Sites in residential neighborhoods might be sold or leased to park or recreation authorities. Or such sites may be sold to private developers, who may need to obtain zoning changes for their use.

The next most advantageous plan for converting a facility is for the school district to lease it for purposes compatible with its original educational use. The school system receives revenue for the building and retains ownership in case of future need. If a suitable tenant can be found, there are no real disadvantages to such a plan. (Local and state laws differ on this matter; in some areas, school districts are prohibited from owning buildings they do not use or from being "in the real estate business." Where such laws apply, they usually require that the district must either turn the building over to another governmental unit or sell it outright.)

Tenants that will use the building for education are ideal. Among these are private and parochial schools, nursery schools, daycare centers, Head Start projects, community colleges or other institutions of higher education, and regional and cooperative educational boards.

Many districts have found the local recreation department to be the perfect tenant. This agency generally uses a school building for adult and early childhood education as well as for recreational programs that appeal to all ages. School facilities are highly suited to arts and crafts, theatre, numerous indoor and outdoor athletic activities, lectures and discussion groups, music and a host of other services provided by recreation departments. Nonprofit clubs and service organizations can make similar uses of schools.

Other governmental units have also served successfully as renters or buyers of unused schools. Health centers and clinics, public libraries, municipal or county offices and senior citizens lunch programs are some occupants of former schools.

The last option to be considered is selling the property for private use. The major advantage is the revenue received immediately and the potential for adding the property to the local tax rolls. Disadvantages are that the building is gone from the schools forever and that commercial buyers are usually hard to find – especially for sites in residential neighborhoods. Nevertheless, schools in various parts of the country are now being used as hospitals and convalescent centers, vocational schools, warehouses, apartments, hotels, offices, stores and churches. Claremont, Calif., turned one old school into a shopping center. Long before the school system in Ithaca, N.Y., was hit by declining enrollment, it constructed a modern complex for its high school. The question was what to do with its old building sitting right in the middle of town. The building now has an array of boutique shops on the ground floor and spacious, high-ceilinged apartments above that are especially attractive to members of the university and college communities – all remodeled by a private developer.

School districts, with advice from neighborhood committees, should consider uses for closed schools in the following order:

- Educational programs run by the district
- Other uses by the district
- Community educational/recreational programs
- Nonprofit or private educational/recreational programs
- Governmental agencies
- Private commercial use

Declining enrollment and unused school facilities have become severe enough problems to prompt legislative action. Several bills to alleviate the problem have been introduced in the U.S. Congress. One would authorize the Dept. of Housing and Urban Development to make grants to communities seeking such "efficient alternate" uses for schools as resource centers, libraries, health centers, county offices, housing for the elderly, college classrooms or administrative space. Another would offer tax incentives to private industry for purchasing school buildings for private

use. Yet another bill takes a different tack – it would change provisions that require school districts to show maintenance of local effort before receiving federal aid allowing such effort to be based on per-pupil expenditures rather than aggregate spending.

At the state level, several legislatures have worked to change state-aid formulas so as not to penalize unduly those districts with severe enrollment drops. A bill in California sought to ensure that reductions in the teaching force because of decline in district enrollment were matched by proportionate reductions in the district's administrative budget.

And What of the Distant Future?

The planning that has so far been described is for the near future – the foreseeable five or six years for which enrollment can be projected fairly accurately. These plans should, however, be formulated with some thought to enrollment and population trends over the longer period and the educational considerations implicit therein.

Russell Davis and Gary Lewis completed a study in 1976 for the Center for the Study of Public Policy in Cambridge, Mass., financed by the National Institute of Education and titled *The Demographic Background to Changing Enrollments and School Needs*, in which they present some of the long-range educational implications of declining enrollment. The major factors are lower fertility rates, changing family patterns and a slowdown in economic growth.

For some time to come, the population will be aging – more adults in proportion to the number of children. While this situation could mean more resources per child, it may as well mean a population whose interests are less child-centered. Thus there is no guarantee that the available resources will be happily given over to education. The increasing adult population may look to the schools for its own needs. If the economic situation is unfavorable, these needs may be in the areas of vocational training and retraining. If the economic picture brightens, needs may be more in the area of leisure pursuits. Either way, school districts might consider increasing both their clientele and their support by serving the growing population over age 24.

Declining enrollment is now so pervasive as to have influenced many college students to stay away from teaching as a career. It is an accepted condition, as well, among much of the adult population. Thus, when enrollments begin to rise, school districts may have difficulty finding teachers and marshalling resources to accommodate the increases. There may be little available capital to renovate outdated or inadequate facilities.

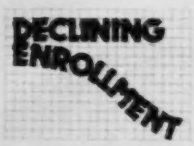
The combination of large numbers of mothers who work and more families of only one or two children may present new tasks for the schools. Children from small, adult-dominated families tend to be stronger on verbal skills but weaker in relating to other children than were the children of the larger families of the 1950s and 1960s. Learning how to "get along" may be a more necessary task for such children than learning how to read – a skill which they may have already acquired by the time they start school. Communities may demand daycare and all-day programs from their school systems, so that mothers can work knowing their children are in "good hands."

The two authors conclude: "The advantage that planners and administrators will have is that the build-up will come slowly and over time. There will be ample evidence of change beforehand, and there will be several alternatives for adapting to situations before they happen."

The National School Boards Assn. suggests that long-range planning should include a definition of goals and the development, study and implementation of strategies to meet those goals. While a crisis-oriented pattern may have been the only way school districts could deal with problems in the past, such a pattern is unsuited to the changing conditions of the present and future. "The benefit of long-range planning activity," says the association, "is that it clearly establishes the district's goals, gives a framework on which to assess the value of short-range programs and gives the district a method for showing its public the direction in which change will affect the community."

Such planning enables school officials to know what programs the community considers essential as well as to extend educational services in directions dictated by changing circumstances. Decline is not necessarily a final stage: education declined in the 1930s and survived to face new growth. Planning for both the short and long range of prospective decline will enable school districts to survive this period as well.

Chapter 4.



Impact on the School Family

There is a limit to how far pupil/teacher ratios can be reduced beneficially. Eventually, declining enrollment means fewer staff members are needed. Numerous acronyms have arisen to describe the process of dismissing staff: RIF (reduction in force) and LIFO (last in, first out), to name the two most common. These feeble attempts fail to apply a euphemistic balm to the wound of losing a job.

And closings and consolidations mean *moving* staff. Like parents and community residents, teachers develop attachments to their particular school for quite valid reasons. They, too, have built up a reputation and influence they wish to maintain. They have learned to work with a particular community, a particular principal and a particular way of doing things that has developed over the years in "their" school. They have made friends and established their position. For them, declining enrollment means being rooted up from the familiar.

Fewer buildings in operation mean fewer principals. Some will lose their job; some will move to other buildings. The rapport and leadership developed with a staff and a community will have to be developed anew. No one relishes going through a disruption in the known and comfortable routine and environment. Principals, especially, can look forward with little enthusiasm to the extra work involved in closing a school or preparing to receive a whole school's worth of new students to orient to an established climate.

Administrators and board members face an arduous and thankless task in reducing and/or transferring the instructional staff in their district. Parents and other citizens may try to use their influence to "save" popular staff members who must go. Principals may beg to retain certain teachers. The process cannot be anything but unpleasant.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF

Early planning can help make the reduction process more humane. As soon as enrollment declines are even suspected, a district can adopt policies that will allow flexibility in making staff changes. It can also negotiate a procedure for reductions and transfers, best done at a time when job security is not the teachers' overriding concern. Even a district that sees no sign of enrollment decline in the near future should beware of agreeing to contracts that guarantee small classes, total job security and a 15% raise across the board; the financial facts of life indicate these items must be negotiated against one another and that no school system will be able to sustain all of them for long.

A district policy may include provisions for

- cutting all other expenses before terminating full-time personnel;
- the dates for notifying teachers of termination;
- the order in which categories of personnel will be terminated;
- provisions for potential consideration as substitute teachers for those being terminated;
- definitions of employe status;
- plans for retraining or reassignment.

It should also allow the district to retain specialists in needed areas even though it may generally rely on seniority as the basis for job security. Morale is an important consideration, and it will deteriorate if confusion is allowed to exist.

Hiring Young Teachers

Cedar Rapids, Iowa, offers the concept of Senior Teacher Associate to those aged 60 to 65 who wish to reduce their responsibilities. Teachers receive as a stipend the difference between their salary and the cost of a replacement teacher. For example, if a new teacher receives $10,000 and the senior teacher was earning $17,000, the latter would get $7,000 as a senior associate. Such teachers have been used in supportive positions — for example, to expand the special education program. The benefit to the district is the ability to hire younger teachers to replace some who with advancing age may have lost their effectiveness in the classroom but not their ability to contribute to the educational program.

Teachers need to know who will go, when, how they will know and what their rights are.

Before the moment of truth is at hand, it is wise to develop a seniority list for the district that has the agreement of the teaching staff. This process at least gives teachers ample warning of where they will stand in a termination procedure. Some districts have been known to search their records to determine — on the basis of minutes — which teachers were hired before others on a given day.

While parents tend to support an individual school rather than the entire district, teachers can be more easily imbued with districtwide loyalty. Some school districts have instituted policies of teacher and principal movement every so many years — whether or not required by declining enrollment — simply as a way of eliminating entrenched positions that many feel are not in the best interests of innovative educational practices.

School districts around the country are now using a variety of strategies to effect gradual reductions in the teaching force. Those that have had to make massive layoffs know that such a process is traumatic in any community.

Instead of basing teacher needs on fall enrollment, when schools generally experience their peak load, many districts now use mid-year statistics. Short-term contracts with new teachers are becoming more popular — not only those limited to one or two years, but also those that hire for just the fall and winter or for part-time services. Job sharing is another strategy; three part-time positions may be more expensive in terms of fringe benefits, but they pay a dividend in not locking the district into full-year contracts. Even tenured teachers may elect part-time work in preference to large-scale layoffs in a district.

More and more districts are creating incentives for early retirement. Seniority plans dictate that the teachers with longest service remain, but terminating the newest teachers — who are usually the youngest, as well — creates imbalances. Sometimes the most senior teachers are no longer the most effective in the classroom. Similarly, those hired to create racial, ethnic or sexual balance generally have the least seniority, and reductions may wipe out attempts at balanced staffing. Early retirement may produce larger savings by reducing the force at the top of the pay scale, but the district has to be ready to cover immediate increases in payments of retirement benefits.

School districts are also becoming less generous in providing substitutes for every teacher absence as a way of realizing savings in the payroll. A negotiating point for retaining personal leave in contracts, for example, is that regular staff members, instead of substitutes, must cover for it. Similarly, curriculum development work may be cheaper to contract for separately outside of classroom time instead of requiring substitutes to take over teaching duties.

Moratoriums on teacher leave mean that teachers in some districts may no longer return to positions vacated for long-term leaves when enrollments were higher. And most districts have become very cautious about filling vacancies created naturally by death, retirement and resignation, insisting that new contracts be flexible enough to provide maximum options in future situations.

Enter the Teachers' Associations

Job security has now become a fighting point for most teacher organizations, surpassing salary as the key item in contract negotiations. Teachers'

associations are fighting hard to make terminations the last possible option for dealing with declining enrollment.

School enrollment in Cupertino, Calif., was more than 2,030 in 1963-64 but less than 685 in 1974-75. At a meeting called by the local teachers' association, ideas collected on suggested policies regarding teachers included:

- Develop a policy for transferring teachers and place mandatory transfers before accepting voluntary transfers;
- Reduce administrative services concomitantly with staff reductions;
- Prohibit use of teaching principals;
- Reappraise the system of parent volunteers;
- Place surplus teachers in supportive positions;
- "Do not close schools to save money, only to improve education."

Increasingly, officials of both NEA and AFT are reporting successful negotiation of no-layoff clauses in teacher contracts. Districts with such clauses use a variety of methods to realign staff. Yonkers, N.Y., devised a system for placing unneeded teachers in a pool of permanent substitutes; reduced class size in kindergarten through grade 5 by an average of three children; established a reading room in each elementary school staffed by a reading resource teacher; started an alternative high school, using "surplus" teachers to develop the program; and created resource rooms for special education. Glen Rock, N.J., replaces resigning general classroom teachers with needed specialists and has expanded elementary library facilities. Gettysburg, S.D., has replaced resigning teachers with specialists and started a program of small-group and independent learning projects in grades 1 to 3.

NEA recommends that teachers take action when reductions in force are proposed by:

- Reviewing the facts and urging the district to maintain existing staff positions in order to improve the quality of services to students;
- Questioning the factual basis for cutbacks on budgetary grounds and insisting that priority be given to payroll funds for instructional programs over those for services not directly of benefit to students;
- Noting any failure of districts to seek and use all available resources.

When reductions cannot be prevented, vacancies resulting from natural turnover should be used first. NEA reminds teachers that firings must be done in compliance with statutory and contractual agreements as well as with the requirements of due process that typically include timely notice, statement of reasons, a hearing and the right of appeal to a court.

When the Reductions Begin

The first advice to a district that must fire teachers is to get good legal counsel. Laws vary from state to state and change from year to year. A plan for reductions devised, as it should be, well before the need for reduction may prove unworkable because new laws or court decisions have since emerged.

Most state laws and court decisions say that firings should be done on the basis of seniority – last in, first out. Some states provide that seniority be based on length of service in the state – not just in the individual district. In Illinois, the laws say tenure is the only consideration and it does not matter how long a teacher has had tenure – one year is the same as 30. (Teacher organizations have been fighting this law.)

School officials who have been through the process of reducing staff are in general agreement that seniority must be overlooked in efforts to maintain balances and specialist positions (but, they warn, be prepared to face litigation on this point). However, they recommend against using reductions in force to weed out incompetence. If a school district took no action on an incompetent teacher in the first years of employment, it has no right to protection after granting tenure. Trying to get rid of poor performers during a reduction in force simply does not work.

Most teachers prefer straight seniority as the basis for layoffs and will fight dismissals for subjective considerations. They usually win. NEA maintains that objective criteria include seniority, certification and credits, in addition to degrees and years of experience, but that districts may apply different weights to each of these. U.S. Supreme

DECLINING ENROLLMENT

What Price Job Security?

Late in 1975, the teachers of the Province of Quebec filed a proposed negotiation agreement demanding, among other things, "total and absolute employment security." The only cause for termination would be "negligence," and any teacher who becomes "surplus" in a local district would be assured of a contract in another district in the province.

The provincial school boards responded with an offer guaranteeing job security but requiring "personnel mobility." Any teacher not re-engaged would receive full salary and benefits and would be assigned "temporary functions related to teaching," but would be required to accept a position with another district within five days of the offer or lose the security. Such an offer might be the envy of most collective bargaining agents in the United States, but the teachers of Quebec refused to accept it on the grounds that five-day mobility would impose a hardship on teachers with families.

Court rulings have said that some subjectivity may be applied so long as it is not arbitrary or capricious. Vagueness of standards will lose every time. Measurable criteria, fully documented with regard to a particular teacher, stand a better chance of being upheld. Firings done in such a way as to damage a teacher's reputation are considered a denial of due process.

Involve the Teachers in Planning

Like parents and community residents, teachers should be involved in making decisions to deal with declining enrollment. School officials should meet with teachers in the early stages of decline to discuss the implications of the problem. Teachers should be involved at the outset in helping to prepare plans and policies for school closings and consolidations, staff transfers and reductions in force. The instructional staff may also be represented on committees and task forces created to study declining enrollment and suggest courses of action.

When potential school closings are announced, teachers' anxieties about transferring to new schools can be allayed through a program of interschool visits. Observing the routine in schools to which they might be transferred — or even an exchange of classrooms between teachers of two schools listed for possible consolidation — helps reduce the fear of the unknown — unknown community, principals, children, building and program. Every effort should be made to transfer teachers to schools with a structure similar to the one they will leave. Moving a teacher from a traditional to an open program can prove disastrous; if it must be done, some orientation to the new system is essential.

The importance of the school principal in closings or consolidations should not be underestimated. The principal is traditionally the most frequent communication link between the school and the community. He or she generally knows which people in the community are influential and which ones will contribute — and in which ways — to the process. Years of contact with parents and visibility in the community are assets to be used advantageously. The principal can be the key to the success or failure of the whole process.

The Principal: A Key

Principals should be kept constantly informed of the declining enrollment situation. They may be the ones to lead community coffee hours, prepare teachers for transfer or loss of jobs and ease the anxiety of students. If they feel a lack of rapport with the central office, they may react by enlisting community support to fight administrative and board action.

Numerous instances of efforts by principals to lead the campaign to save a school — with successful results — have been documented throughout the country. But their unique and pivotal position can also make principals allies, rather than adversaries, of the central administra-

Plan Ahead

Early planning is crucial to the successful handling of the problems of declining enrollment. M. Lee Blaustein, principal of Franklin High School, Somerset, N.J., presented the following guidelines at a session of the National Assn. of Secondary School Principals 1976 convention.

1. Plan budget cuts each year on a descending basis.
2. Consolidate and tighten programs now that you have time, not pressure.
3. Commit yourself to specific high-level programs and curtail those aspects of your programs that have been hanging around via the luxury route.
4. Consolidate teacher needs each year so that the eventual reduction in staff is a slow, thoughtful one and allows you to retain the best and prevent accumulation of the worst.
5. Evaluate all assigned tasks. Question the effectiveness of programs and positions. Request value for the dollar.
6. Establish a PPC — planning priority for cuts.
7. Involve staff in all aspects of planning so that you become not the target but the bow and arrow.
8. Search out innovative and valuable organizational patterns. Have teachers visit school systems with working programs; sift out the ones you can use.
9. Create an opportunity for teachers to self-police the search for value.
10. Fly-speck every inch of your staff and expenditures. Do this on a regular, share-the-headache basis.

tion. The district should arrange professional meetings among principals of schools that may be closed. When a principal has to be moved, visits to the new school and meetings with the staff and community should begin well in advance of the changeover. Above all, principals supplied with correct information can squelch rumors and mollify unrest among others affected by the process.

Involvement: A Plus

Districts responding to the *Education U.S.A.* survey were overwhelmingly positive about involving the instructional staff in the school-closing process: 75 responded that they had involved teachers, 33 that they had not. Almost all involve teachers in decisions affecting teachers — staff reassignment or reduction. When they work with task forces, staff members may serve either to supply data or actually sit on the task force. In some cases, teachers have their own, separate task force working on solutions to special problems. At the very least, the instructional staff should be kept informed so they can answer the questions of parents and community. Several districts report involving staff through the local teachers' association, which serves as an existing forum for, and potential committee of, the district's instructional staff.

Declining enrollment forced changes in teacher assignments in 100 districts; only 20 responded that no staff changes had been made. Of those making changes, 37 said they were voluntary (although several qualified that with "as far as possible"); 26 indicated mandatory reassignments; and six districts reported "both." Reactions of the teachers range from negative and militant (including resignation from the district), to neutral, accepting, good and supportive. There is no correlation between voluntary or mandatory reassignment and the resulting reaction. Most districts that did make changes relied not only on seniority but on such other factors as program needs, balanced staffing, teacher preferences and available vacancies. Several were under court or federal order to improve racial balance in their staff. As would be expected, teachers preferred transfers to outright reductions in force.

STUDENTS

If the adults affected by declining enrollment are like mature trees — deeply rooted in their environment — the students are the saplings with the ability to bend. In most school districts that have gone so far as to close, combine or reorganize, student reaction to the process has been found to be negative at first but quickly turns positive after a brief period of adjustment.

Students, too, fear the unknown. They are concerned about unfamiliar teachers, principals, buildings, neighborhoods and classmates. They may worry about riding to school instead of walking, or about a longer bus ride than they had previously. If they have built a good reputation and a position of leadership in their present school, they worry about starting all over again.

In only 10 districts responding to the *Education U.S.A.* survey was student reaction reported to be negative on the whole, while 56 said the reaction was positive and five reported it as "mixed." In 21 districts that have moved students from their original schools, "no reaction" was reported.

The negative student reactions that do exist are, according to most respondents, reflections of parental attitudes. Children at the elementary school level mimic their parents' opposition but adjust rapidly. The concerns of secondary school students are more personal, or at least peer-influenced, and need to be addressed more intensively. In many cases, their strongest concerns are about extracurricular activities and athletic programs, although they also worry about course changes. Several school officials warn against ignoring a future decline at the secondary level and against increasing electives now; students will balk at losing such options when declines in enrollment force curtailment.

According to the Macon County, Ala., school superintendent, students "were interested in who their new teacher(s) would be, any loss of school credit and adjustment to different peer groups. However, these concerns posed no visible problems." In Topeka, Kan., high school students planned their own "encounter" experiences to break down social barriers. Allowances made by the district to transfer extracurricular participation "helped smooth the adjustment," the superintendent said.

The respondent from the Riverside (Calif.) United School district has a typical appraisal: "It is my strong belief that students are greatly more adaptable to these situations than parents. Once the change has been made and the students become acclimatized to their new school, there appears to be little or no problem."

A number of respondents said they did not know how the students reacted. Even if reaction is minimal or not readily apparent, the school district should not assume that students are unconcerned. Some early program planning will enable a district to avoid transferring students to schools with approaches and texts that are markedly different from those they leave — a factor that can severely prolong the adjustment process. Interschool visits are as essential for students as for teachers. In many districts, students from schools to be consolidated start having physical education, art, music and other nonacademic experiences together during the year before the change is scheduled.

Students, too, need to be kept informed. They should know the reasons for the change and the benefits they will receive thereby. They should have the opportunity to ask difficult questions and to get honest answers. To the extent of their maturity, they can be involved in a process that is occurring, in the final analysis, for them.

ADMINISTRATORS, BOARD MEMBERS

School administrators and school board members also have personal concerns about — and perceive threatening situations in — declining enrollment. To the community losing a school, a teacher being fired or a child being transferred, the superintendent and the board were the all-powerful persons who made the decision but were not affected by it. Those persons who spent countless hours and lost much sleep over the problem see it differently. If they were aware of the impact of their decision on their many publics, they struggled to make the right decision. They need to direct its implementation and hope they can make it work.

Declining enrollment in general poses certain threats to the school administrator. As a nationwide phenomenon, it means that there are fewer administrative positions, fewer opportunities for advancement and fewer resources with which to do the job of leading a school system. There may be large numbers of younger, fresher, better-qualified administrators available to move into fewer positions. The statistics on superintendents who have been ousted from their jobs because of dissatisfaction with their management of decline is a constant reminder, a constant headache and a constant pressure not to make mistakes in an extremely difficult task. The job requires a delicate balance among the many groups affected — within the system and within the community.

The superintendent must understand the district thoroughly. What are the politics? Which groups must be addressed? Who will become involved? Who will fight a closing and who will support it? To what special needs of all concerned may appeals be made?

Superintendents who go into a neighborhood to discuss a possible school closing without knowing all the characteristics of that neighborhood can be defeated before they begin. In one large school system in the Middle Atlantic region, a school in a relatively affluent neighborhood was slated for closing partly because the district administration believed its students could alleviate racial imbalances developing in other schools. The administration was surprised when it discovered that the school was thoroughly and successfully integrated.

Board members, too, live with great pressure and anxiety when facing decisions on declining enrollment. If the public decides against their reelection, they lose esteem as public officials who could not retain public confidence through their actions. During the process of reaching decisions, they can expect to be approached by many citizens hoping to influence their vote. They will be besieged by conflicting concerns and expected to weigh each carefully.

The superintendent and the board should have a satisfactory working relationship with one another before they embark on dealing with declining enrollment. In this situation, however, each will have to remember and understand the unique pressures on the other.

Together they will have to provide the leadership without which nothing will be accomplished. That leadership must be high in its intentions, sincere in its efforts, skillful in its execution and intelligent in its direction. They must be bold. They cannot back away from decisions because the pressures become too intense. Situations crying for decisions will not simply go away. Craig Currie's advice is apt: "Live by the courage of your convictions, and do what is right for the kids. It won't be the saber wounds that'll get you; it's the pin pricks that will cause you to bleed to death."

On the other hand, they must recognize the limits of their ability to solve some of the problems. They must be willing to listen with open minds and change their minds when reason dictates change. Somehow, they must draw the fine line between exercising the necessary leadership for moving ahead and remaining within the boundaries of the possible.

Chapter 5.

Involving the Public

Life would be considerably easier for school administrators and school board members if decisions about declining enrollment could be made solely on the basis of objective considerations. At first glance, closings, consolidations, reorganizations and other possible solutions appear to be administrative decisions based on the facts.

But who said life is easy? The facts as gathered merely point to a problem: the number of schoolchildren is declining. Finding a solution, however, is not a "numbers game." Solutions will affect people. They will affect them at their most vulnerable, most emotional points – their children and their pocketbooks. Declining enrollment is a human problem.

A school may be a facility – an administrative statistic on a central-office wall map. In a community, it is a place where children learn, make friends and grow. It is a focal point of parental and community involvement and activity. It is a place where people work, interact, develop careers and attain status. Its presence is a symbol of the vitality of a neighborhood and an asset to the property values.

Closing a school is not simply the reverse process of opening one. Building and looking to the future produces different emotions from those engendered by tearing down and remembering the past. There are two cardinal rules for dealing successfully with declining enrollment:

- Don't make unilateral decisions.
- Recognize the human problem over the nuts and bolts of administration problems.

The involvement of the public is essential. Decisions from administrative offices and board rooms announced with finality to staff and community will have predictable results. Not only will the resistance be strong, but there is likely to be a move to change the people occupying those administrative offices and board rooms. Superintendents and board members who have lost their positions because of dissatisfaction with the way they handled declining enrollment grow in number by the year. At present, the average term of a superintendent in a suburban district is two years, four months; in an urban district, one year, eight months.

Given the problem and the need for a solution, involvement of those affected has a twofold benefit. First, it allows for discussion and appraisal of a diversity of ideas and approaches. Second, it becomes an educational process by which those affected learn the limits of making decisions that will both solve the problem and be acceptable to all concerned.

The Human Problem

How the public is involved and for how long depends on the nature of the community and the nature of the problem in that community. But in all school districts, "the public" is not a monolithic entity. It is actually comprised of many groups, each with its own special knowledge and skills to contribute to the decision-making process. Parents and community residents, the instructional staff, students, board members and administrators are all affected, and all have a role to play in reaching decisions.

Parents and Community Residents

In many school districts, especially those serving middle-class suburban areas, the parents are the mainstay of the schools. They give freely of their time, energy and money working through PTAs and volunteer programs to support and improve the schools. When there are few problems and when professionals and community members agree

They will also see the closing of "their" school as a dismantling of a familiar and comfortable way of life. The most vocal objectors to a school closing are usually those who have been most active in school affairs — not simply because they always tend to participate in discussions of school-related issues but because their positions are threatened. Parents who have served on the PTA, built up a rapport with the principal and staff, volunteered in the classroom and guided extracurricular activities have received in return a position of status, influence and self-fulfillment through the school. Now they must start again in a strange environment. Parents whose children have already gone through school may still see the school as a reflection of the years of effort they once invested. Community residents without children may see a potential school closing as proof that the community is past its prime. These concerns are real and valid. School officials are well advised not to ignore them.

Urban Parents See Threats, Too

In urban communities and in areas where the population is characterized by less affluence and education than in those "first-ring suburbs," school on the goals and directions of the schools, harmony prevails. When a problem as critical as declining enrollment arises, however, administrators have been known to say, "If we could get rid of those parents, we could make and implement our decisions with no fuss at all."

"Those parents" are the same ones the administrators loved when things ran smoothly. Their concerns still center on the quality of their children's education. Now, though, as the school system faces declining enrollment, their ideas about what the school district should or should not do may run counter to the ideas of the administrators. Administrators see only conflict, when they should be seeing the same concerns they once valued so highly.

Resistance to change is inherent in human nature, especially when changes are made in a situation that has previously been mostly favorable. Closing a school that has been working well is bound to cause resistance. Parents will be concerned about the program in the new school, the length of the bus ride or the hazards of the new walking route, provisions for a child's illness during school, the social and ethnic character of the new school, provisions for after-school and extracurricular activities and the ability of their children to adjust to the new situation.

DECLINING ENROLLMENT

Luring the Children Back

Neighborhood enrollment declined precariously in six small schools serving a relatively affluent area of Washington, D.C. Then the schools also started losing children who had been bused in to relieve overcrowding in other areas when new schools were built in those areas. Parents, teachers and administrators devised a plan to merge the six schools, turn one into a resource center, and make each of the remaining five an attractive alternative.

Attendance at any of the five schools is open to all the children residing within the boundaries of the complex. The resource center offers such special subjects as art, music, drama and physical education to the students in each school. One school is a middle school for grades 5 to 8. The other four offer a bilingual program, an extended day program for children with working mothers, a cooperative program with nearby American U. and a model primary program for children in prekindergarten through grade 4. Parental participation is a strong force in the six-school complex.

Neighborhood enrollment grew from 500 to more than 700 in the project's first two years, as children returned from the private schools. Real estate agents who used to criticize the area's public schools now use them as a selling point.

closings are resisted for other reasons. The local school may be the single factor that unifies the community. Without the school, the isolation and lack of community identity so prevalent in such areas can increase. Furthermore, involving the community in solving the problems of declining enrollment is usually quite difficult. Katherine Eisenberger, who teaches at Hunter College (NY) and has served as consultant to a number of school districts undergoing enrollment declines, recommends that school closings definitely be the last resort in these areas. Instead, school officials should invite directors of municipal service agencies to establish programs in the surplus space in the schools: day-care centers, health and mental health clinics, vocational training and career counseling, recreation programs and welfare units. In this way, the school becomes even more of a focal point for meeting community needs.

Keep Your Publics Informed

In suburban and small-town areas, parents and community residents can and should be involved in the process of finding solutions from the time the problem is first identified. While a number of school districts have either chosen or been forced to reach decisions in a crisis atmosphere and in a very short time, many school officials express the opinion that even relatively conflict-free situations would have been better if more time had been given to informing the public of the problem. It takes time for people to adjust their thinking to the implications of decline.

The informational stage may begin two to three years before a decision needs to be made. Presenting the problem, answering questions and allowing discussions to proceed freely can help build awareness of the ramifications of the largely statistical data the school district has gathered. In view of the number of districts that have made inaccurate projections, publicizing the projections early may have another beneficial effect: community residents who have some statistical expertise of their own might analyze the data and correct or confirm the conclusions.

Several methods have been used successfully to involve parents and community residents at this stage. PTA meetings are a recognized forum for airing school problems. If the district does not have a districtwide council of PTAs, where PTA officers from individual schools can share ideas and plans, one should be formed. School officials should also speak about declining enrollment to other civic groups in order to inform as many segments of the community as possible, including citizens without children in the schools. Coffee hours, at which school administrators speak to small community groups, can facilitate informal discussion and help the school administration build credibility. Details can be explained and rumors clarified so that everyone is at least working with the same information.

Surveys, the Media, Advisory Groups

Surveys, questionnaires, and polls are a way of telling community residents their thoughts and ideas are wanted, as well as informing them of the situation and allowing time for gradual adjustment to it. Such devices also provide board members and school officials with valuable information about aspects of the problem the community considers most important. The questions can suggest the current thinking of the board and administration, while the answers may offer clues to areas of misunderstanding in the community. Such opinion-gathering may be done by mailing forms to voter lists, conducting random face-to-face interviews or telephoning. It has been done effectively by trained volunteers, but the best advice is to hire an expert if the funds are available.

At this point, too, the media can help inform the public. Drawing in the media at the early stages, outlining the problem and explaining possible choices for the future can build a base of communication and understanding between the district and the media that will be to the district's advantage in the later, more emotional stages.

When the need for decision becomes more imminent, advisory committees, task forces and study groups can provide intensive analysis of the problem. Broad representation of the community on these panels enables the citizens to exchange views, understand one another's concerns and develop options to be considered in the final phase.

The districts responding to the *Education U.S.A.* survey reported community participation by a margin of more than 3 to 1: 78 said they involved the community in the decision-making process; 24 said they did not. Most of the districts that encouraged participation did so "from the very beginning," "continuously," "at every step" or "immediately after gathering the basic data." The extent of involvement ranges from none, to open board meetings or public hearings, to surveys and

polls, to meetings in the neighborhoods or at the individual schools affected, to committees and task forces representing the schools involved and to broad-based districtwide advisory committees. Many districts have used various combinations of these procedures. Very few of the districts actually going through the process of declining enrollment report bypassing the community. Several respondents say they plan to involve the community when the situation becomes a problem in their district. While a small number report that decisions were made without community participation and without adverse reaction, the practice is not generally recommended.

Hear What the Respondents Say

School officials of the Penn-Trafford School District, in Harrison City, Pa., met with concerned parents after the first announcement of potential closings and accepted several recommendations. The Madison Heights, Mich., schools report that there is no "acceptable" way to close a neighborhood school, but if the information is presented to community councils they can see the problems of population and costs realistically.

The schools in Mt. Prospect, Ill., are undergoing serious financial problems, "although our worst years are still to come," the respondent said. They have closed one school and are considering closing more. They have involved the public through open board meetings, community advisory councils and public hearings – with successful results. "There is good community understanding," says an assistant superintendent, "although few relish the closings."

The Indianapolis public school district has closed schools and adjusted attendance boundaries, involving the community through citizens' committees and public hearings. "At the beginning of any announced investigation," says an assistant superintendent, "reactions were negative. In most circumstances, when all the facts were known and the rationale for closing as well as the educational benefits were explained, reactions were positive."

State law in Florida requires community advisory committees in each of its 67 school districts. In some that are going through the process of declining enrollment, superintendents have established a committee at each school. The Leon County (Tallahassee) Schools use countywide committees and receive good reactions to closings from those who participate but "bad from everyone not involved."

The Vinton (Iowa) Community Schools, faced with closing one school in 1973-74, involved the community through public hearings. The reaction was "mostly supportive," says the superintendent. "I would handle the problem the same way again – with honest, straightforward talk."

In Zanesville, Ohio, however, the board presented its mandatory decisions without public involvement and got at least temporary negative reaction. The Malone (N.Y.) Central School District closed a primary school without community participation and now finds the decision was premature because of crowded classes in kindergarten and first grade. The respondent feels that if the community had been involved, the mistake would not have been made. Unified School District 457 in Garden City, Kan., combined several rural schools; the board's decision was made without community involvement and brought "severe reactions."

The North York schools, in Willowdale, Ontario, Canada, tried to close three schools, but the board backed off in response to strongly negative reactions. Community input came by way of public hearings and special committees, but the survey respondent said they would proceed differently next time. Informal talks with the community on potential closings, he feels, would help make understood the need for such action.

Frustration is the prevailing mood in the Riverside (Calif.) Unified School District, which closed two elementary schools and adjusted boundaries at three others. The response was "outrage and dismay" from the families affected. "Every possible group or interested party was involved in the decision-making process, from the beginning until the board's final vote," says the respondent. "However, I am convinced you cannot persuade the local neighborhood that their school is no longer needed. Any facts you may present will not be believed or received as valid. Counter-arguments from this group are never-ending."

The consensus appears to be that – no matter what the reaction – the more ways the public is informed and involved the better. Negative reactions will not be avoided by excluding the community, but they may be softened through community understanding.

How Much Time, How Much Involvement?

The length of time from the first indications of enrollment decline to implementation of a decision, and the amount of involvement by the

various groups affected, depend on the characteristics of the community. The politics, the kinds of reactions and the ability of representatives of various groups to participate — all weigh in the decision on how to organize the decision-making process.

Equally important is the nature of the problem in a given school district. If declines are forecast in a few years, there is ample time available to educate the community gradually. If declines have been sharp and a budgetary deficit is imminent, decisions are needed immediately. The nature of the problem dictates the type of decision to be made, which in turn is a factor in the amount of time needed. A simple boundary change affecting only a few students requires far less time than the closing of several schools in a district.

Responses to the survey by *Education U.S.A.* show that the right amount of time varies from district to district. One district found one month about right; one thought a year was too little. Ten felt two years was right; two thought it too much. Four districts report working on the problem five years and still being in the process of making decisions. Some districts that have gone through more than one school closing report that each case is different and may need more or less time than another, even within the same district.

Eisenberger recommends starting to educate the community two or three years in advance. The Educational Facilities Laboratories agrees, suggesting a two-step process: (1) presenting the facts of decline for the district as a whole and allowing some time for these to be digested, then (2) recommending specific solutions and forming task forces.

Doyle Winter of the Highline school district in Seattle emphasizes that much work goes into studying the problem, preparing reports and making decisions. A reasonable amount of time, in his opinion, is one year to 18 months. "The process is more comfortable if you have even more time," says Winter, "but there are now models from school districts that have been through it which make the job easier."

The Cold Spring Harbor (N.Y.) Central School District watched costs rise and enrollments decline starting in 1970. By 1974, the schools had experienced several voter rejections of both budgets and methods of coping with decline. A task force was established in June 1975. It took a year to study the problem and make recommendations, all of which were for action on closings to be delayed until further declines had occurred.

The community wants to have its say and to participate in making decisions. At the same time, it does not want to see its property values go down while decisions are pending on its schools. Time is necessary to build awareness, but time also permits factions and protest groups to develop.

The school district in Madison, Wis., took two to three years to reach a decision and found that the citizens committees polarized and fought each other. The respondent from Madison Heights, Mich., maintains that "a high price is paid to convince communities to accept the inevitable." The Erie (Ill.) Community Unit Schools took three years to come to a decision. Says that respondent, "It is better to do it in a year and solve the problem without giving protest groups time to organize." The Shawnee Mission (Kan.) Public Schools took about 10 weeks the first year to hold public hearings in the schools to be closed, which was about right for them. The second year a longer time was allotted, a respondent said, "thus giving community representatives additional time to build their case of resistance."

In the Fenton Area (Mich.) Public Schools the time needed to reach a decision was one year, but the respondent feels they should have started earlier. The Michigan City (Ind.) Area Schools reorganized its junior high schools in six months. Said a respondent, "The time was too short to consider all the ramifications, including some overcrowding in the receiving schools."

The Suffolk (Va.) City Schools took two years and the respondent feels the community would not have accepted the change sooner. In the Lawrence (N.Y.) Union Free School District, it took six months to adjust boundaries only. The superintendent believes the timing was right, but that it would have been too tight if a school were to be closed. The assistant superintendent of the Park Ridge (Ill.) elementary schools reports that the decision there was reached in 18 months. "For those violently opposed," he maintains, "20 years would not have been enough."

On the other hand, the coordinator of public information for the Oak Park (Ill.) elementary schools says, "We have taken at least three years, worked extensively with the community, had countless meetings and we do not feel this is too much. When a decision is reached, all concerned — staff, parents, community — will have had many occasions to give their point of view."

Chapter 6.

Making Decisions

The projections of declining enrollments were made, and now they are coming true. Staff, parents, community and students have been made aware of the problem and its implications and have adjusted to the idea that eventually some changes will need to be made in the schools. Perhaps some attendance boundaries have already been altered, some new uses have been found for empty spaces, some classes combined and some programs cut. Now the enrollment declines require more drastic measures. In about a year, half a year or a couple of months, a decision must be made. There is no easy way to reorganize, consolidate or close schools. There is no one right way to do it, because modifications are dictated by the nature of both the problem and the community in any specific situation. There are, however, some successful models and some general procedures that can be adapted to most problems and most communities about to make decisions on dealing with declining enrollment.

The Task Force

The task force – or citizens advisory committee or study group – is the most widely used format for arriving at a set of alternatives from which the final decision is made. It brings together representatives of various community groups who study the facts, discuss their concerns and try to arrive at a consensus on several options that would solve the problems and be acceptable to those affected.

Those who serve on such panels learn how difficult a process it is. They have an opportunity to review all the data and gather information on their own. They serve as a link between the school board and administration and the community, verifying the need for a decision and the complexity of trying to weigh all interests and be fair to all concerned. If they are truly representative and not chosen to endorse preconceived conclusions, and if their work is used – as it should be – as the basis for the board's decision the charge of unilateral action can be avoided. The task force can take a great deal of the heat off both the board and the district administration. It can provide a rational approach to a highly emotional problem.

Eisenberger describes three basic types of task forces. The type used depends primarily on the amount of time available:

- **The In-Depth Seminar** meets all day, Saturday and Sunday, for two successive weekends. Most of the data gathering must be completed beforehand and ready to turn over to this group. Experts on the school district staff in such areas as finance, transportation, facilities, curriculum and the characteristics of individual schools should be present continuously to serve as resource persons. The group may divide itself in different ways as it works; for example, by like interests (as all PTA leaders, all civic association representatives) and then by mixing the interests for another meeting. An advantage is that consensus and conciliation are more likely to result from such an intensive effort. A disadvantage is that the tight schedule may cause some important factors to be overlooked. It requires participants somewhat experienced in the conflicts of group organization and ought to include assistance by consultants trained in group dynamics, but it usually results in a well-reasoned set of recommendations on which there is substantial agreement among the participants. It provides strong impetus for the board, the administration and the community to move toward an inevitable final decision on a plan of action.

- **The Study Group** meets over a period of six to eight weeks, once or twice a week. The methods used are similar to those of the

in-depth seminar, but the effort is less concentrated. It, too, requires a high degree of structure, preplanning and data resource persons on hand for its effective operation.

- **The Extended Study Committee** works for about a year, meeting once or twice a month. Besides receiving the narrow charge of making specific recommendations, it may also gather data and actually design the proposed plans. It may divide into subcommittees or divide the year into segments in order to study different aspects of the problem, e.g., enrollment trends, facility use, program needs and so on. Its major advantage is in permitting a comprehensive study. Its major disadvantage is that the extent of time often allows factions to develop.

Composition

Representation on the task force should be as broad as possible. Letters should be sent to all organizations – civic groups, citizens associations, political, business, and religious groups and the like – as well as to the PTAs of all schools in the area. (If a small group of schools is designated for action in a larger area, representatives of contiguous but temporarily unaffected schools should be invited as well.) Each group should appoint its own representative(s), to thwart accusations of a hand-picked rubber stamp of the board and/or administration. That kind of reaction negates the entire purpose of the task force, which is to allow a representative body to make the recommendations on which the board will vote. Those who are in opposition to the potential plans should be included. Otherwise, they are likely to form their own protest groups. Working within the organized structure, they are more likely to be drawn into the process of reaching a consensus. At the very least, they will continue in their recalcitrance and file a minority report.

After all groups have named their representatives, the board and administration can reserve a few appointments for themselves. Are all the key people included? Be sure, for example, that the president of the local teachers' organization has been invited. Is there someone who has been trying for months to get the superintendent fired but has not been named to represent a particular group? Appoint that person to the task force. Have the groups unwittingly chosen most of their representatives from the same neighborhood? Equalize the representation.

Opinions differ on whether staff and board members should sit on the task force. Those in favor present the following arguments:

- The superintendent or other administrator can facilitate the group's work;
- Unless board members understand the process of arriving at recommendations, they may still back off from making a final decision – especially if the opposition becomes intense before the vote;
- Many staff members are also community residents and are thus entitled to representation, and they have the additional advantage of a working knowledge of the school system.

The opposition arguments are as follows:

- The superintendent is best advised to take as low a profile as possible during this phase;
- Board members who sit on the task force are in the strange position of making recommendations to themselves, but they can observe the meetings in order to understand the process;
- District staff members should serve as resource persons, providing the task force with the benefits of their special knowledge – but the task force should be essentially a lay citizens committee.

Both methods have been used successfully, but much depends on the urgency of the problem and the time available. In the Monroe County (Ind.) Community School Corp., both the superintendent and some of the board members sat on the task forces; their representation was considered necessary because of the critical nature of the problem there (see case study p. xx).

Of the choices available for selecting the leader of the task force, none is ideal. Following are the various ways of naming a leader, with the advantages and disadvantages of each:

- An outside consultant will have expertise both in dealing with declining enrollment and in group dynamics, and will be perceived as unbiased, but may not have sufficient credibility with the community and the task force members.

- A central office administrator will have approximately the same advantages and disadvantages as the consultant but may be looked upon as pushing the superintendent's views.

- A leader appointed by the board from the task force membership may have none of the necessary skills and may also invite charges of manipulation by the board.

- A leader elected by the membership will have credibility and popularity but may lack expertise in developing consensus.

The Charge

The charge to the task force – what it is expected to do – should be *specific* as to both the scope of responsibilities and the date on which the task force is to report. The shorter the time in which the task force will work, the narrower should be the charge. An in-depth seminar may be asked to select among a dozen possible plans, already designed in some detail (possibly by a committee that worked on this assignment during the preceding months), and identify the three or four most acceptable. An extended study committee may be asked to gather data; make enrollment projections; determine the savings to be realized from closing schools; decide on criteria for closings and for selecting options, and produce a set of alternatives for additional consideration.

Task force members are usually lay citizens, not educators. They are better able to evaluate options than to devise them. The administrative staff of the district should prepare some possible plans for closing or reorganization to give the task force a start. From these, the task force may be able to produce modifications or generate some totally different kinds of plans. The task force might be given eight or nine general possibilities, some of which may include closing. The process will best prove its worth if suggestions for specific closings and consolidations emanate from the task force itself. Those hard decisions, then, originate not with the school board or administration but with the community.

In many cases, the district administration becomes so absorbed with costs, transportation and facility use that it neglects curriculum. Task force members, particularly those with children in the schools, may be most concerned with the educational program. Especially in districts considering reorganization, restructuring or alternative schools, the members may be less interested in the number of school buses needed to transport the children than in the program they will be offered once they reach the school. If the task force is asked to consider an option that includes, for example, closing one school and creating "magnets" of several others, it should be given the details of some possible magnet programs.

There are several answers to the question of to whom the task force should report. One is that the task force is charged by and reports to the board, with a copy of that report going to the superintendent – who will then make a report either selecting the best and most feasible options recommended by the task force or designating other options or modifications for the board to consider. A second is that the task force is charged by and reports to the superintendent, who then submits the report to the board along with comments and perhaps personal recommendations. A third is that the task force reports to the board, and only later – after all public hearings have been held – does the superintendent offer recommendations, a procedure that allows the superintendent to assess community reactions before becoming personally involved.

The Process

The process through which the task force goes is essentially one of "study, report and recommend." Those who have been through the process, however, maintain that the greatest difficulty for the task force is agreeing on its organization and how it will operate. Here is where an effective leader or some outside guidance comes in most handy.

First, the task force needs to decide how it will carry out its charge. Will it divide into subcommittees or divide the time allotted into segments for each subject? Actual working committees of more than 12 to 15 members can become unwieldy. A task force of larger numbers is advised to divide into subcommittees. Next, it needs to work back from its reporting date and allot time for each activity, including writing the report. Then it will need to prepare a calendar of meeting dates. It must decide whether meetings are to be open or closed. (Closed meetings may better suit the needs of a study group in which much negotiating among vested interests will go on.) The task force should identify resource persons at the outset – experts in various areas from the district and the community.

DECLINING ENROLLMENT

Charging the Task Force

Following are some typical assignments given to task forces on declining enrollment:

- Project enrollments (although this seems more appropriate for a technical staff).
- Visit the schools.
- Determine capacity and rate schools.
- Set up criteria for closing any school.
- Recommend which schools should be closed.
- Report on savings from and any added costs of closing.
- Establish a priority for closing.
- Recommend subsequent uses.
- Find possible takers.
- Search out legal constraints.

The study phase starts with gathering all pertinent information. If the task force's time is brief, much of this work will have to be done beforehand by the district administration. If there is time, task force members can visit the schools, conduct opinion polls and surveys and do their own research into district records. Next, the task force must decide on the objective criteria and the weights for each (see Chapter III), put each school through the test and rank them on the basis of their scores.

The ranking gives the task force a concrete, objective and numerical basis with which to proceed. But it does not produce a decision. There are innumerable social, emotional and political factors to be considered. At this point, the one phrase that appears to have echoed from district to district, in one form or another, will be heard once more: "I can understand the need to close a school, only don't close mine."

The rational, intellectual process points to some logical courses of action. The emotional, subjective factors cannot be so easily measured, but they must be considered. Every district has at least one school that works so well it cannot be closed. Every neighborhood has special features that make it unique. The logical conclusions may well be altered by some plain "gut reactions."

In some districts, racial balance is an important consideration. Of 172 districts responding to this question on the *Education U.S.A.* survey, 30 reported that racial balance was a factor – in addition to general enrollment decline. Those under court order had little choice as to how to handle it. Those that could make such decisions accepted only plans that would improve balance or eliminate impaction, resorted to "pocket busing" and/or remained constantly aware of the possibility of creating segregation through boundary changes. In most cases, the addition of this factor caused considerably more emotional reaction from the community than would have occurred if school closings and consolidations had been the only issue.

When the task force has reached a consensus on the alternatives to present for board action, it must prepare a report. These range from simple products duplicated on office equipment to elaborately printed and illustrated publications. Whatever the district's resources for producing the report, it should contain a statement of the charge, the information collected by the task force, the criteria on which decisions were based and its recommendations for action. The report must be well publicized throughout the community. It should be easily available to anyone wishing to read it.

The final phase of the task force's job is to present its report to the board and/or superintendent and to appear at public hearings to answer questions and explain the report. Such hearings are essential. Districts have been taken to court by irate parents claiming that the decision to close their school was arbitrary; the districts have met the challenge successfully when they could show ample opportunity for public testimony before the decision was reached.

The hearings must also be widely publicized. They should be spaced in time and location to allow anyone who wishes to appear and be heard. Once again, the cry will be heard to "close any school but mine." The speakers may be emotional, but they will have some important things to say. Their comments should be noted and considered for possible modifications of the task force's recommendations.

Many will question the balance between financial savings and the upheaval of a neighborhood. School districts should be careful to subtract the costs involved in closing a school from the money to be saved by not maintaining it. If they do not present honest figures, some financial wizard in the community is bound to catch the discrepancy.

Most districts responding to the *Education U.S.A.* survey and reporting severe enough enrollment declines to warrant closing or consolidation of schools have used some kind of citizens' task force. Many that have not yet reached that point say that such committees will be formed when the time comes. Most report the task force to be an effective method. The Topeka (Kan.) Public Schools started a community advisory committee to study the segregation situation, but the board subsequently asked the same committee to advise it on school closings. Representatives were elected by the community, along with some appointed from such special interest groups as the Chamber of Commerce, minority organizations and the teachers' association. The respondent assesses its work as follows: "The committee worked many hours and helped take the heat off the decisions. It could have been better organized and given more time, but I believe the board takes the community more seriously now."

In the Glendale (Ariz.) Union High School District, however, the experience was less satisfactory. A committee, appointed by principals and confirmed by the board, was formed to study rezoning. According to the assistant superintendent, "The committee rapidly formed majority and minority factions. Those persons in areas proposed for change formed an opposition group. Citizens unaffected by change assumed a majority role. The outcome remains in doubt."

The Decision

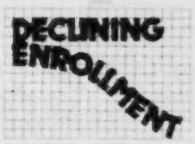
The board, the superintendent and the task force should understand from the beginning that the role of the task force is advisory. The task force will *not* make the final decision. If it has done its job properly, it will present a set of alternatives that demand action. The board may change, modify, increase or decrease – but it cannot back away. Nor would it be politic for the board to ignore the task force's recommendations completely – even if they run counter to board members' notions.

Lexington, Mass., saw its school enrollment fall from 9,609 in 1969 to 7,547 in 1976, with a projection of 5,692 for 1980. The school board proposed that four elementary schools and one junior high school be closed between 1977 and 1980. After considerable public outcry, four citizens committees were formed in 1975 to study enrollment, finance, pupil distribution and philosophy. According to one board member, "The result of their work is a bonanza of knowledge that other school districts throughout the country can but envy." Within three months, the committees produced reports that showed the schools would again be needed after 1980 and the savings to be realized from their closing would be minimal. A fourth report, completed in a year, questioned the assumption that small schools are not good and showed that the smallest and oldest of the schools was the best educationally. Despite the reports, the school board voted to go ahead with the closings as originally planned.

It is entirely possible that a task force will make recommendations that do not coincide with the views of the school board or superintendent. If it is broad-based and representative, and if the facts show a clear need for closings, a conscientious task force will recommend them. If another course of action seems wiser – again based on thorough study of the situation – a good task force will recommend the wiser course. If the district agrees that the task force will be the vehicle for making the study, it should be ready to accept at least the objective results of the study.

Using the Media Positively

Throughout the course of analyzing projections, creating public awareness of declining enrollment, forming task forces and reaching a decision, the media – both internal and external – can be the district's staunchest ally or worst enemy. Declining enrollment and school closings may be the epitome of a situation requiring constant public communication to present the facts, clarify misunderstandings, dampen rumors and ease the emotional impact.



Minimize Surprizes

A PTA president attending a meeting on potential school closings was surprised to find her own school on the list. Noting that there had been no prior warning that her school was even under consideration, she said, "It's like coming to a funeral and discovering that you're the corpse."

A district undergoing declining enrollment is hot news for the media. School administrators complain unendingly that when all is going well — when the children are learning and achieving, when the parents and teachers and community are satisfied — not one line gets into public print. The facts of journalistic life are that news is what is new. When neighborhoods are outraged, when protest groups are formed, when the board and administration are under siege — that is news.

Most journalists, however, are not monsters. The district administration should be ready at the earliest signs of enrollment decline to meet with local journalists and explain the situation. Get out the flow charts, the statistics and the projections. Be honest and open. Let the press — both print and electronic — know that as declines continue they may warrant closings, consolidations and reorganization, which may well cause emotional reactions and strenuous efforts to save schools in many neighborhoods. Enlist their assistance in keeping the situation as calm as possible.

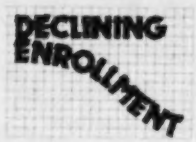
If pertinent information is kept hidden, some energetic journalist will uncover it. If everything is presented honestly, the media may, instead of dwelling on the traumatic, be a valuable aid in getting the story to the people. They should be kept completely informed throughout the entire process: by personal contact, press releases, invitations to board meetings and informational copies of district communications.

Suburban districts situated in the shadow of major cities with newspapers that cover whole metropolitan regions may not get the amount of coverage they need or want. Small city and town districts with their own daily newspapers may find they get more than they need or want. Either way, a great deal of the communication to the public will have to come from within the district in order for the district to present its case the way it feels is appropriate.

Besides the meetings and surveys described in Chapter 5, other methods can be used to build community awareness. The administration's public and staff newsletters should alert people to the problem. Information sent to editors of PTA newsletters may get the message across in individual schools. Informational handouts mailed or sent home with students can advise parents of the potential implications of declining enrollment. As the problem proceeds toward a solution, the district might set up a telephone hotline to provide the community with a source for verifying the increasing reports and rumors.

As schools are listed for closing and decisions are made, there will be no way to keep everyone happy. But addressing people's concerns can help temper reactions. Parents will want to know what savings will be realized; how educational quality will be affected; what provisions will be made for transportation; what uses will be made of the closed school, and how the closings will affect neighborhood stability. Property owners will be interested in the impact of the closing on the community and its property values and tax base, the compatibility of alternate uses of the school and the permanence of the change. Teachers will be concerned about job security, changes in approach and programs, new working conditions and promotional opportunities. Students will ask about extracurricular activities, transportation and consistency of courses and instructional style. Providing as much information as needed — as readily as it is requested — can go a long way in helping the district to enlist the support of its many publics.

Chapter 7.



In Conclusion

What is past is prologue, and everything now turns on a successful implementation of the board's decision. Perhaps the ultimate vote of no confidence in the decision is the flight of families from the district because of it. Flight may take the form of moving away, not moving in (which is difficult to measure) or transferring to private schools. Of the districts surveyed by *Education U.S.A.* that had been through most or all of the process, 28 said flight had occurred and 81 reported it had not. Fourteen of the respondents noting flight attribute it to the racial situation; only four report closing or consolidation as the cause. One claimed that noninvolvement of the community and indecisive action resulted in flight. In general, the flight occurs with forced busing to achieve racial balance, not with school closing or consolidation because of declining enrollment alone.

During the transitional period, the district administration should pay careful attention to the apprehensions of the groups affected. Before the schools are closed, there should be exchanges of faculty between buildings. Teachers exchanging classrooms of like grades and subjects can be reassured that their new school will be a pleasant place in which to work. Students visiting their new school for a day will get a preview of new classmates and teachers. The inevitable scheduling and transportation problems diminish in importance when the strangeness is gone. PTAs should hold combined meetings toward the end of the school year before the closing. If possible, officers for the following year should be elected by the membership of both schools.

Some aspects of the final decision can be left to the parents. A number of districts reported their plans were modified by reasonable parental requests. In some cases, parents have been given a choice as to receiving schools, for example; in others, the designated receiving school has been changed when a majority of the community verbally favored another school.

Most of the survey respondents who reported flight said nothing could have been done to prevent it. A few, however, noted that a continued emphasis on quality of instruction makes families feel they will lose more by leaving than they will gain.

Parents – even those who grumble when their tax bill comes – do not like to think of their children as pawns whose education is being traded off to balance the district's budget. A school district estimating a savings of, say, $80,000 by closing a particular school might decide to save only $60,000 and use the remaining money to put "something extra" in the receiving school: a hands-on science laboratory, a fully equipped art or music room, a diagnostic center, a physical education teacher full-time instead of once a week, an environmental center – the list of possibilities is endless. Instead of merely pronouncing the doom of closure to the community, school officials can offer a list of extra resources the district will be able to make available. Such a plan not only softens the blow; it also tells the community that the school district administration and board are at least as interested in improving education as in balancing ledger sheets.

A Final Word

Declining enrollment in a given school district may not lend itself to a single, one-time solution. In a year or two, the district may be back at the planning table searching for additional solutions. There is one consolation according to respondents to the *Education U.S.A.* survey: the first time a district makes significant changes to deal with declining enrollment is generally the most difficult.

Case Study 1. Salt Lake City: Learning from Experience

The last urban center anyone would have thought to be among the first to undergo a severe decline in school enrollment might well be Salt Lake City. A beautiful and somewhat isolated city, its population in 1960 of about 189,000 ranked it exactly midway – 65th – among U.S. cities with 100,000 or more population. School district boundaries are the same as those of the city.

Other cities that lost population during the 1960s were coping with desegregation, but such was not the case with Salt Lake City. Its minority school enrollment is about 12%, consisting primarily of Chicanos (about 10%), Indians and a small percentage of blacks. It has never been under court order, and its schools have been voluntarily desegregated without much problem.

In the late 1950s, however, attractive new suburbs were developed to the south of the city, linked to the city by freeways. Middle-class families by the hundreds found it easy and pleasant to live in the suburbs and work downtown.

Salt Lake City's enrollment peaked at 42,323 in 1958-59 and has been going down ever since. The first year of the drop, the schools lost 1,458 students. Since 1970, the district has lost an average of 4.4% of its enrollment annually. In 1975-76, its enrollment stood at just over 26,000.

Nor was there any warning. Many districts have been alerted to an impending decline by the fact that their increases tapered off in the years immediately preceding the decline. Salt Lake City's increases for the five years before the decline were, consecutively, 1,362, 279, 320, 345 and 967.

No rush to private schools characterized this city's loss of public school students, as was the case in some other urban centers. Plainly, Salt Lake City lost its population. By 1970, it was down to just over 175,000 and had dropped to 74th in nationwide rank.

Avoiding the Problem

For 10 years, the school district did little. Ten schools were closed, never more than two in one year, but three new ones were opened.

Meanwhile, of course, the problem did not go away. Utah ranks among the top states in the nation in its program of equalization of state educational funding. Money generated by Salt Lake City's tax efforts is drained off to equalize downstate areas, thereby depriving the city of the option to increase its taxes in order to save its schools. State aid formulas did not provide even a year's breathing time in situations of enrollment decline. Loss of a student in June meant less state aid in September. Furthermore, school districts in Utah are prohibited by state law from deficit spending.

The then superintendent, headed for retirement, decided against the unpopular and avoided school closings whenever possible. The district had no choice but to slash away at educational programs. Librarians, enrichment programs, counselors and instructional staff were cut. Class size was increased. At the same time, the suburbs were voting huge sums to build schools, thereby further increasing the attraction of those areas for young families.

The First Time Is the Hardest

After serving as deputy superintendent for seven years, Arthur Wiscombe moved into the superintendency in 1969. He presided over the closing of six schools in June 1970.

"Maintaining a school that should be closed cost the district about $600,000," says Wiscombe. "I saw little choice between using the money that way or for educational programs for the children. The problem had gone on so long that I estimated, at that time, we would have to close five schools a year just to break even."

Task forces and committees were formed during the 1969-70 school year. Wiscombe met with the mayor, the city council and representatives of various minority groups. He sought support from numerous groups and took representatives from the university, PTA and the Mormon church (an especially strong influence in Salt Lake City) through the schools to explain the problem. Public meetings were held for standing-room-only crowds. The citizens were involved and broadly represented, but the result was bitter controversy and strenuous efforts to "close someone else's school."

"I would say it takes about three years to condition a neighborhood to closing its school," Wiscombe comments. "But when you are trying to avoid a budgetary disaster, how many years do you have to talk about the problem?" Dollar savings and the district's efficiency were the central points of the issue. But the citizens saw loss of neighborhood schools as a negative response to the problem. Their children would be forced to attend schools with a wider racial and socioeconomic mix, over increased distances and with increased hazards. The collective interest of the school district was submerged beneath the self-interest of each family. There was little time to change attitudes.

Wiscombe attempted to work with the press from the beginning. He met with the editorial writers and top staff of the area's two major newspapers and with the executive boards of the local television stations. He explained the problem with charts and graphs. Sensing the outrage of the community, however, the media proved to be no ally of the school district.

For Wiscombe, the final blow came when the state legislature reduced Salt Lake City's school board from 12 to 7 members. Campaigns for the board centered on "no school closures." Members who had served as long as 16 years did not return, and the board's stability was destroyed. Having lost his base of support, Wiscombe had little choice but to resign from the district.

A New Approach

In 1975, Salt Lake City closed three schools, bringing the total number closed since 1958 to 23. The transition was smooth; the community accepted the decision calmly. School board members elected on a promise not to close schools have turned around to face the problem.

Salt Lake City may have learned the hard way, but it did learn. The present superintendent, M. Donald Thomas, has instituted a school-closing plan that allows more citizen involvement over a longer period and takes into account the major concerns of the public. But Thomas admits that his job is easier because of the action of his predecessor. "The situation had become critical by then," he says, "and there was no choice but to move quickly. I have been able to deal with the problem more slowly, and that has been a big advantage."

Thomas devised the following plan:

Step 1. Establish a comprehensive citizens' committee to study the problem and make recommendations to the board of education.

a. Provide assistance to the committee.
b. Have them operate under a specific charge.
c. Set a date for the final report. Do not extend the time.
d. Make the report public at the same time it is given to the board of education.

Step 2. Hold public meetings to discuss the report, to develop tentative solutions and to receive additional information.

a. Discuss implications of conflict on school district.
b. Present the problem-solving process to public.
c. Give and receive information.
d. Record all information presented at public hearings.

Step 3. Develop tentative solutions and modify them if necessary.

Step 4. Present final solutions at a general public meeting.

Step 5. Take action at an official board of education meeting.

Step 6. Implement board of education decisions.

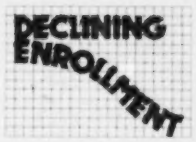
A citizens committee takes about a year to develop options and make recommendations. It is chosen by nominations from the PTA and a broad range of citizens groups, from which the board then selects about 30 members. The committee is provided with some general alternatives, but the specific details emanate from the committee itself. Its report is mailed to some 200 influential persons in the city and to the media. Another year is spent on public hearings, at the end of which the board makes its decision. The district implements the decision in the next school year.

Thomas stresses that the central consideration is not money but programs. He demonstrates at public meetings that school closings are directly related to program, that the citizens have a choice between retaining the schools or retaining educational services. In recent years, according to Thomas, money saved by school closings has been used to start special programs for the gifted, to increase library services and to reduce class size in kindergarten through grade 3. And, he adds, the community has accepted the advantages of program improvement over the operation of more buildings.

Recent closings have been primarily junior high schools, as the district moves to a pattern – recommended by the citizens committees – of K-6, 7-8, 9-12. The city's four high schools have already converted to the four-year program and thus will not need to be closed. There are strong attachments to high schools, and parents feel strongly about neighborhood elementary schools. The junior high schools appeared to be the logical target. While parental protest did emerge at public hearings, the logic of improved programs was difficult to defeat.

The media have once again reflected the mood of the public. Says Thomas, "The press has been positive lately – very fair, objective and supportive. We have done extensive public relations work."

For the most part, however, it is the citizens of Salt Lake City who have now become adjusted to the implications of declining enrollment and are able to accept the solutions. Had the process begun when decline first occurred, the adjustment might have come sooner and without the rancor that accompanied those first closings. Now that the community sees its educational needs being met, flight from the city has decreased. No additional school closings are slated for the immediate future, but there may be some further reorganization. The stability that now exists in Salt Lake City and its school system may be characterized as one of accepting the inevitability of change.



Case Study 2. Illinois: Legislative Mandates, Inadequate Communication

Enrollment trends in the state of Illinois run closely parallel to those of the nation. Public school enrollment for kindergarten through grade 12 increased in the state for 27 consecutive years after World War II to a high of 2,373,659 in 1971-72. By 1974-75, that enrollment had declined 3.9%.

The most important factor in the decline was a drop in the number of live births in the state. In its peak year, 1959, Illinois had nearly 240,000 births; by 1970 the number was below 170,000. Secondarily, migration into this North Central industrial state was almost equal to migration out during the 1960s; during the first half of the 1970s, migration out slightly exceeded migration into the state. A small increase in the high school dropout rate may have also contributed to the decline; enrollments in private and parochial schools were not considered to be a factor.

The State Task Force

In the spring of 1975, the new state superintendent of education, Joseph M. Cronin, appointed a task force to study declining enrollment in the state. Its charge was (a) to stimulate awareness of the problems and opportunities associated with declining enrollment; (b) to outline the major issues and options; (c) to make practical suggestions to local school districts; (d) to generate greater planning efforts at state and local levels; and (e) to recommend further state action.

The task force, consisting mostly of local superintendents from representative districts in Illinois, divided into four committees — projections, economics, facilities and staffing and programs. In December 1975, it submitted a detailed, 79-page report which was sent to all local superintendents and also reproduced in summary form for wide public distribution.

The report contains a wealth of carefully amassed and analyzed information. One committee chairperson maintains that even so, much of the detail included by the committee was edited out before publication. Among the highlights of the report are the following:

- Based on projections made by the Illinois Dept. of Public Health, the annual number of live births was expected to rise by 1975. (Speaking before the Illinois Assn. of Regional Superintendents in July 1976, Cronin noted these predictions were holding true.)
- Kindergarten enrollment should begin to rise by 1980-81, but total elementary enrollment (K-8) will not show an increase until the late 1980s.
- Declining enrollment represents a loss of state aid but no drop in facility and personnel expenses, at least in the short run. The task force recommended changes in the state aid formula.
- School districts should involve staff in developing long-range plans for staffing — including criteria and procedures for reductions, training school officials in the requirements of due process, provisions for hiring teachers trained in several fields or levels and policies on transfers and leave.
- School districts should explore the opportunities for programs created by declining enrollment. The task force recommended that educational requirements proposed to the state legislature be evaluated in the light of enrollment decline.

- The public must be involved in the process of deciding to close schools and disposing of school property.

In all, the task force made 26 separate recommendations concerning declining enrollment.

The Local Problem

In April 1976, *Education U.S.A.* brought together school administrators from eight local Illinois districts experiencing enrollment declines. All eight were from districts in Chicago's suburbs and thus somewhat removed geographically from the state capital in Springfield.

The local school officials described the extent of the problem in many Illinois districts, not just their own. Some of the northern districts are still coping with growth, they said, but these are mostly "third-ring" suburbs with heavy migration into the school district. Meanwhile, the Niles district has planned to close a high school in 1980, Glencoe was forced to close a brand new elementary school in 1975-76, and Evanston had plans to close three elementary schools and one junior high school in 1976-77. In Worth, state aid was expected to go from $1 million to zero in one year because its assessed valuation rose 40%. The local administrators were forecasting that 3,500 teachers in the area surrounding Chicago might lose their jobs by the next year. School districts in the area east of St. Louis, they said, are dying. One district – a mining community in Franklin County – was filing for bankruptcy. In another area of six elementary school districts feeding one high school, three are in the process of closing buildings and "three have so much money they have no problems."

Only two of the eight administrators had seen the report or even knew of the existence of the state task force. Those who had seen the report felt it said little they did not already know and that it was years behind on the problem. "We are far beyond considering alternate programs to absorb excess staff, for example," they said.

All eight gave high marks to the new state superintendent for trying to improve communication between the Illinois Office of Education (IOE) and local districts. At the same time, they held out little hope that much would be accomplished. Each district is assigned a liaison with IOE, who is supposed to voice their concerns and answer their questions on all matters. "Some are specialists in particular areas and see all problems from the viewpoint of their specialty," said the administrators. "Most are inexperienced. The communication between the state and the local districts is very impersonal. It is nearly impossible to get specific information on anything, not just declining enrollments."

These officials claim they get most of their information from meetings of colleagues in similar positions – superintendents, supervisors and principals. "It's a process of inservicing each other based on experience," they said.

Cronin had started to convene meetings of local superintendents at the beginning of the school year. The local officials feel they are beginning to get good information on issues associated with laws – privacy of student records, Title IX (prohibiting against discrimination on the basis of sex), student rights and responsibilities. "But declining enrollment is uncharted," they noted.

The eight administrators agreed that if IOE suggested a plan for dealing with declining enrollment, they would have little confidence in it. "What we need," they claimed, "is a resource person from the state who could come to the district as a consultant and help with our problems. But the state people are neither knowledgeable about the problems nor adept at finding solutions. Cronin wants to help, but he hasn't enough money to hire top people."

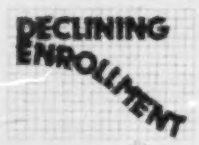
Mandate Special Programs: A Critical Aspect

One critical aspect of the problem, according to the local officials, is recent action by the state legislature. Special interests have pressured the legislature to mandate such programs as

health, early childhood and consumer education; special education for all handicapped children; and driver education taught by certified teachers – but the necessary funds have not been appropriated. Just enacted is a law providing for free textbooks, estimated to cost about $50 million, with an initial appropriation of only $10,000. In 1973, the legislature created an equalization formula for the state, to be funded over a four-year period. By the third year, its funding had dropped below the levels originally required. The law, however, prevents local districts from increasing their own spending levels in order to retain schools and maintain programs despite declining enrollments. State law provides that a tenured teacher faced with dissmissal is entitled to a hearing before an officer from IOE, but the state office has no funds specifically appropriated to provide the hearing officers.

The local officials noted that Illinois' structure of dual districts – elementary districts feeding into separate high school districts – produces a system marked by preoccupation with limited interests. A member of the state task force agrees. The narrow concerns of each school district, along with the pressures of each interest group to get their programs enacted despite insufficient funds, pose severe constraints on coping with declining enrollment. He observes, however, that these situations exist in most other states, too, and that the lack of capable persons in the state office is a charge that could be leveled in every state.

He disagrees, though, that communication is poor between the state and the local districts. Cronin, he says, addressed local administrators on the problem of declining enrollment before issuing the task force report. "The state task force studied the issue and produced the general information that was necessary. The next step is for the local administrator to face the problem. Local officials tend to blame the state. The state, in turn, blames the federal government. In the end, the children get shortchanged." He concludes, "We need strong leadership at all levels to take the necessary action to meet the challenges that confront us."



Case Study 3. Monroe County, Inc.: More Decline in Enrollment than Money

The Monroe County, Ind., school district closed three schools and cut more than 100 staff positions in the 1974-75 school year. The superintendent of 10 years still has his job. Three board members were up for reelection the following fall; they chose to run and retained their seats.

The Monroe County Community School Corporation (MCCSC) was formed as a consolidated district in 1968-69, merging the Bloomington Metropolitan School District with all but two of the county's townships. It covers 360 square miles within which are Indiana U., part of a state forest and a natural reservoir.

Its schools operate in a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 grade structure; in 1975-76 these included 17 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, 2 comprehensive high schools, 1 area vocational school, 1 alternative high school and 1 school for the trainable mentally retarded. Enrollment was 12,806 at the time of consolidation, reached a high of 13,156 in 1971-72, and stood at 12,637 in 1975-76.

The Problem

MCCSC's enrollment drop was insignificant in comparison to most districts now wrestling with the problem. Its biggest loss in any one year was 200 students.

But in 1973, MCCSC faced a financial crisis that appeared to produce only dead ends on any route to a solution. Inflation was increasing the cost of education at an alarming rate in Monroe County as well as everywhere else in the nation. Even the small decline in enrollment meant less state aid. Then the Indiana legislature enacted a tax bill designed to provide relief for property owners, freezing the amount that could be taxed locally on the basis of assessed valuation. Although the wealth of the community increased, the community was already making the maximum legal tax effort and the schools could not take advantage of the increased wealth for increased school revenue. In addition, the legislature mandated expanded programs in special education without providing adequate funding.

MCCSC looked toward the 1974-75 school year and saw a potential deficit of $750,000. The crisis was one year away, and the district administration knew it had to act immediately.

Creating Awareness

Each summer the citizens of Monroe County receive the annual report of the school system as an insert in their local newspaper. In 1973, the report presented the problem and outlined the causes and implications.

At the beginning of the 1973-74 school year, a letter from the board president and superintendent to all parents alerted the community that action would begin soon. That fall, the local chapter of the League of Women Voters was asked to present the problem on a local television program.

The district administration kept principals of all schools informed of the facts as the situation progressed. The principals, in turn, served to cool anxieties in their communities by explaining the options under consideration. District officials went to each school in the district to present the problem and answer questions.

David Staver, MCCSC's public information officer, says, "Advance notice to the public is crucial, even if the message does not come across — and some will not realize what is happening until their own school is slated for closing. Our message was that you can't spend more money than you have. In retrospect, I think we may have told the community more than it needed to know. But no one can accuse district officials of being so involved in crisis management that we forgot to warn the community."

The Process

Had the problem been one of declining enrollment alone, the solutions might have been different. Options for creative use of space would have been considered. The small decline and the large impending deficit left only the alternative of more efficient operation of the district — close schools, reduce staff and cut educational programs.

Two study committees were formed, one on staff and one on buildings. The committee on staff consisted of a teacher from each level (selected by the local teachers' association), an elementary and a high school principal, the superintendent and two board members. The committee on buildings included three parents (selected by the community leadership), two district administrators, two teachers and two board members.

The make-up of the committees was a departure from the suggested practice of involving broad community representation. "The critical nature of the problem dictated this decision," says Ronald Walton, MCCSC superintendent. "Four out of the seven board members sat on the committees, because in that way they could understand the committee process and defend it — or at least explain it — to the rest of the board. The committees had the advantage of proceeding in their work with some tie to board opinions. There was no way we could have allowed the board to sidestep a decision if it felt the political heat. This process ensured a decision from the board.

"We decided against representation of the lay community on the staff committee," Walton continues, "because we felt that reductions were a matter for the professional staff to address. Teachers agreed to sit on the committee because they knew the reductions were coming and they wanted to help formulate the plan.

"Finally," says Walton, "we believed that a committee on buildings made up of representatives from each building would work to continue the special programs and staff ratios that existed in some schools. We could no longer afford such latitude. There were many objections, but the district had to become systematized if we were to improve efficiency."

The committees worked for three months, meeting once or twice a week. Their charge included a firm reporting date; extending the process would serve only to exacerbate both the problem and the hostility that emerges over school closings. Both committees pored over volumes of data, analyses by staff and a variety of approaches. The building committee toured every school in the district. The staff committee heard numerous resource persons talk on staff use. Both made intensive studies.

The committee reports and recommendations were presented to the board at a public meeting in February 1974. Having sat on a committee, the superintendent did not make separate recommendations. The meeting was publicized and televised over the public broadcasting channel.

"We knew reactions could be hostile the first time the reports were unveiled to the public," says Walton. "We brought in a professor from Indiana U. to moderate. We set a limit of three minutes on each speaker from the audience."

Staver believes that bringing in a moderator who was articulate, familiar with the problem and experienced in parliamentary procedure had a great effect on the decorum of the meeting. "Don't discount the television cameras, though," he adds. "Even if you just set up the videotape, turn on the lights and don't run the tape, you'll go a long way toward keeping the meeting under control."

Seven more public meetings, two of them televised, were held in various locations in order to reach everyone who wished to hear the recommendations and react. "Our purpose was not to convince but to explain," says Walton.

The recommendations included higher pupil/teacher ratios and cutting several educational programs and extracurricular activities, along with reducing staff and closing schools. "In my estimation," observes Walton, "the community was much more up in arms about bricks and mortar than about educational programs. There was some criticism of class sizes of 28 instead of 22, but nothing to match the anger over closing the schools."

Both Walton and Staver agree that working with the press was difficult but essential. The one newspaper serving the community, they feel, runs good features on the schools but sensationalizes the controversial issues. "Any negative point about the schools makes the front page," muses Walton, "but we can only hope to get our National Merit scholars on the last page."

Staver says that if he were going through the situation again, he would make a special effort to meet with media management. "I'd explain that they could either help us find a good solution for the children or blow up the whole thing. I would advise school officials to sit down with them from the very start, and be as open and honest as possible." Staver also feels that the district could have enlisted the support of the media by meeting their needs; for example, showing the press how the solutions would result in better educational programs might have given reporters a handle for covering the situation.

"In our case," says Staver, "we solved our communication problem by going directly to the public. We held public hearings. We established a hotline for questions. Closing schools is a no-win situation. Some people will be unhappy. But the board had a reputation for being open and honest and managed to come out with sound decisions and remain unscathed."

The Final Decision

The board's final decision was, in fact, a modification of the committee recommendations, based on response at the hearings. It decided against cutting yearbooks and newspapers from the high schools, for example, but it did eliminate instruction in foreign language from the middle schools, reduce the number of librarians and counselors and increase class size. Instead of closing the seven recommended schools, it decided to close three city schools (two elementary and one middle) and then close three more elementary schools to the south in 1976-77, after a new facility could be built to replace them.

The parents at one elementary school took the district to court, claiming the board acted arbitrarily in closing the schools. MCCSC produced some 60 hours of taped public hearings. "Our case was that we provided due process through seven public hearings," says Walton. "We spilled our blood in front of television cameras." The court upheld the district.

"For administrative, legal and public relations reasons," says Staver, "keep records of everything. We even have a record of each call to the hotline, what the problem was and how we dealt with it. I would not have televised the final board meeting at which the decision was made. There were some political trade-offs, and it was all done in public. But televising the hearings and not the board meeting would have only brought criticism from the media, and our actions served us well when we got to court."

Implementation

Once the decision was made, the administration set about implementing it as smoothly as possible. New attendance boundaries were drawn with the help of the PTAs of the affected schools. In each case, the entire enrollment of a school was moved as a body to its new school, in order to keep friends together. Pupils from schools to be closed spent two days in

their new school before the term ended. Walton personally spoke to the faculty of each school to let the teachers know the plans for the following fall.

Staff reductions were made in accordance with the plan developed by the teachers, based on straight seniority. "Although there were some problems with morale, the teachers were not overly anxious," says Walton. "If we had had the time, we might have been able to develop a performance criterion to make cuts on the basis of merit. Given our situation, seniority was the only answer. We might also have been able to give 15 months' notice, which is easier to take than 30 to 60 days." Administrators, however, were terminated on the basis of merit.

As it turned out, most of the terminated staff was rehired within the first year. The staff committee had projected some attrition, but in Bloomington most resigning teachers do not give notice until the summer. Terminations announced in May could be recalled by the fall, and most staff members were reassured by such projections.

MCCSC ended up saving more than it needed to meet the deficit and then received some additional money from the state. The district promptly restored some of the cuts in positions for librarians and counselors. "As the situation settled," says Staver, "and new school patterns were established, the bitterness drained away. As the financial situation improved, we were able to restore some educational and extracurricular programs. We could still be living with hostile feelings that just don't exist." MCCSC considers itself lucky.

Case Study 4. Great Neck, N.Y.: Politics in A Political Community

Great Neck, N.Y., is an above-average community in many ways. Sitting at the western edge of the north shore of Long Island, immediately adjacent to New York City, it is a "first-ring" suburb where real estate values are well ahead of the general market. Its upper-middle-class population has a median educational attainment level of 14.1 years; 35% of its adult residents have completed four or more years of college.

The school system is among the largest in Nassau County, serving some 10 communities or incorporated villages with a total population near 50,000. In 1962-63, its enrollment was at a high of 10,418. It had dropped to 8,300 by 1975-76 and was expected to decline to 6,797 by 1980. Its professional staff numbers 650, and its per-pupil expenditures are well above $3,000 annually.

Most of the residents would say without hesitation that a principle factor in their moving to Great Neck was the schools. They are involved in, and supportive of, their educational system. They have been known to defeat school budgets because they considered them too low rather than too high.

Great Neck grew with the postwar baby boom. In the 1950s, the school system hurriedly built five small schools for kindergarten through grade 3 to ease the overcrowding in the elementary schools. At that time, parents objected to spliting the elementary grades and to spending so much money for so many buildings. In 1957, the district opened its second junior and senior high schools, creating a complex in the south to match the existing one in the north of the community. Enrollment began to decline in the mid-1960s; at the same time, the tax rate began to rise sharply. Great Neck suffered its first school budget defeat in 1959, but subsequent defeats occurred mostly in the early 1970s. In 1971-72, the schools operated under severe austerity after the budget failed three votes; parents were billed for library books, textbooks and instructional supplies. Even when budgets were passed, the school system found itself in increasingly austere conditions through 1975-76.

During the early 1970s, too, conflict developed between the school board and the superintendent. A conservative majority of the board at one point attempted unsuccessfully to oust the innovative superintendent. According to an article in the February 1976 *Phi Delta Kappan*, the result was further relinquishing of school board authority to the professional administration: "Although New York state law is quite specific in giving school boards well-defined, almost absolute powers, generations of Great Neck school board members seem to have abdicated their authority and have permitted it to reside in the superintendency."

Against this background, the board also tried to cope with the increasing decline in enrollment. In 1968-69, an outside consulting firm made projections showing continuing decline through the 1970s. In 1972-73, the district administration produced some alternatives for consolidating the schools; the community recognized the problem but opposed the suggestions. A task force on redesign of the school system made a year-long study, which was submitted in June 1975. An advisory referendum was included on the school board ballot in June 1975, authorizing the board to study further and give serious consideration to consolidation; it was endorsed by a vote of almost 3 to 1.

An In-depth Study Committee

The school board, now changed in membership from the one that had been operating under controversy, decided to act quickly. It hired a consultant and formed a citizens task force that would operate as an in-depth study committee over two weekends in December 1975.

The community was informed of the creation and activities of the task force through the regular district newsletter, *Our Schools.* About the time of the task force's first meeting, a five-page survey was mailed to 14,000 residents, asking opinions on various aspects of potential consolidation. Responses totaled 2,970, or 22%, and included more than 2,000 comments as well as answers to specific questions. The board also created a telephone hotline through which the community could ask questions about school consolidation.

The task force consisted of 64 representatives of school attendance areas, faculty and various community organizations. The district presented it with eight options for elementary schools and two for secondary schools, along with data on such items as enrollments, projections, facility use, transportation and costs. Resource persons were available throughout the process. The task force met from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day of the two weekends, dividing itself by different methods into tables, each of which was to reach a consensus (defined as 80% or better) on the best of the plans.

By the end of the process, the task force was able to offer preferences, if not complete consensus, and some recommendations. It found two options acceptable for elementary schools, slightly favoring the one that called for closing the K-3 schools and sending all children to the K-6 schools over the one that called for reorganizing six schools into a K-3, 4-6 pattern and closing the remaining elementary schools. An option for reorganizing into a middle school pattern was popular but was rejected because it was believed to require additional construction. Both secondary school options called for closing North Senior High School; the task force favored one that would have placed grades 9 to 12 in the south complex and grades 7 and 8 at North Junior High School.

Two additional suggestions emerged from the task force. One, based on the realization that plans to close North Senior were predicated on the great amount of remodeling needed by the school, called for the board to adopt a mandatory plan of building maintenance, to be published and scrupulously followed. The second was for the board to consider closing Arrandale School, which had been replaced as a regular instructional facility because of age and obsolescence and was being used for the district's adult education program but which was never included in any option for possible closing.

Community Reaction

The board publicized the task force report and its recommendations and made copies available to the citizens of Great Neck. A month later, it held two public hearings, allowing interested citizens to sign up to speak for a maximum of three minutes each, during each 3½-hour meeting.

Community reaction was strong, vocal and hostile. The articulate residents of Great Neck left little doubt as to their negative feelings about both the process and the results.

On the process and the task force membership, comments were caustic. Citizens objected to the limited time given the committee. The board, they said, had studied the problem for years, but the community had only days to deal with it. Many questioned the omission of the options of closing Arrandale and retaining North Senior. One noted that every functioning civic association in the north of the district was excluded from representation. Several pointed to other instances of skewed task force membership. Some made statements to the effect that the results of the referendum did not authorize the board to make changes so drastic they would tear the community apart. "The citizens who voted for it never envisioned these results," they said.

The recommendations, the speakers noted, had the effect of pitting parents of primary children against those whose children were in secondary school. Parents of the young children spoke of the educational advantages offered by the K-3 schools. Parents of secondary school students objected to the distance their children would need to travel to a single high school in the south and questioned the opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities. Each group hoped the solution recommended for the other might

save their own schools.

A number of citizens took issue with the projected savings, claiming that $500,000 in a budget totaling $32 million was not worth the upheaval. Some brought along their own cost figures, opinion surveys and transportation analyses. Many questions were raised as to the educational value of a school for grades 7 and 8, which was promptly termed a "revolving-door school."

The Decision

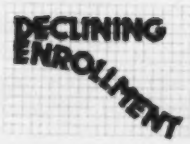
The school board held a public meeting in February 1976, at which it voted on adoption of a plan. The board president opened with the following statement: "In the scramble for competing dollars at a time of financial urgency, we have watched the slow but steady erosion of our programs and personnel . . . lost, to a considerable extent, because scarce resources and personnel are spread among increasingly underutilized buildings. We believe that unless immediate measures are taken to manage the district's resources more effectively, the erosion of school quality is bound to accelerate in the light of generally deteriorating economic conditions at least as far as school districts are concerned." He noted that while no one plan was considered perfect, doing nothing was not feasible either.

He then offered a compromise plan to the board: (a) close three K-3 schools in July 1976, the remaining two probably in 1977; (b) reorganize the district into a middle school structure – K-5, 6-8, 9-12 – by September 1977, if possible; (c) keep all four secondary schools open for the immediate future, use them in the conversion to middle schools and authorize an immediate study of needed renovations; (d) analyze the needs of the adult education program and the costs of operating Arrandale, its potential for sale or lease and the possibility of transferring at least its daytime classes to schools emptied because of consolidation; (e) plan intensive orientation programs for students and faculty to be transferred. The savings were projected to be $575,000 the first year and $800,000 the second. "This is an educational plan that will save money, not a money-saving plan that will hurt education," he concluded. The board adopted the plan unanimously.

The citizens applauded the retention of both high schools, the plan for a middle-school structure and the proposed study of Arrandale. The board had heard their concerns.

By the end of the 1975-76 school year, the attitude of the community could be described as accepting but uneasy. The budget proposed for the following year, despite the projected savings, was $2 million higher than the previous budget. Many believed that the task force had expended much energy considering plans formulated by the district administration that would never have been received favorably by the community. The omission of the Arrandale school from any plans was viewed as evidence that administrative expediency was the major criterion in devising the original options.

Finally, there was an undercurrent of feeling that the board had not really listened to the community as much as to its own membership. It wanted, above all, a unanimous decision that would discourage further reactions by presenting solid board agreement to the community. Some Great Neck residents believe that in the executive sessions preceding the decision the board capitulated to the strongest of the community's demands because that was the only way to draw at least one minority vote into unanimity. Somehow, the process worked in Great Neck, although possibly not the way anyone would have written the script in advance.



Case Study 5. Montgomery County, Md.: Numerous Problems, Intense Involvement

Montgomery County, Md., is a little bit of everything. Its 500 square miles stretch from the Potomac River and the northern boundary of Washington, D.C., to fertile farmlands and rolling green hills. It is urban, suburban and rural. Its population of about 500,000 has the highest per-capita income of any county in the nation, but its pockets of poverty are visible to those who know where to look.

Much of its population consists of professionals and top executives in the federal government, who work not only next door in the District of Columbia but, to a considerable extent, in office buildings and complexes within the county. It is a county of experts.

When its school system undertook to find solutions to declining enrollment, for example, it found itself presenting population projections to a systems analyst from the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, discussing racial imbalance with a staff member of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and trying to avoid arbitrary and capricious decisions in front of U.S. Dept. of Justice attorneys. These are the residents of Montgomery County.

The county grew in the 1950s and 1960s in response both to the baby boom and to the burgeoning federal bureaucracy. As in most areas, the growth started near the city and only gradually moved upcounty, where some growth continues. The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) opened more than 100 new schools during this time, creating a network of neighborhood elementary schools serving small areas, some less than a mile apart and most with enrollments characterized by the homogeneity of the surrounding development.

Its peak enrollment was 126,311 in 1972-73, but the coming declines were clearly signalled. During the 1960s, enrollments grew by 4,000 to 6,000 a year, but enrollment growth was 3,522 in 1969-70, 373 in 1970-71, 863 in 1971-72, and 104 in 1972-73. Since then, the school population has declined by increasing numbers annually to 116,827 in 1976-77, with another drop of 4,500 expected in 1977-78. By 1981-82, an enrollment of 105,814 is expected. Kindergarten enrollment, however, is projected to start rising again in 1979-80.

In addition, MCPS has an increasing minority population concentrated in certain areas. In 1975-76 its total minority enrollment was about 12%, but 13 of its schools had minority enrollments exceeding the U.S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare guidelines. Having dismantled its dual system in 1954 and made positive efforts to maintain balanced enrollments since, its board was found not to be in legal violation of the guidelines after a federal review in 1974.

Attacking the Problem

MCPS closed its first school in June 1972 – a 47-year-old elementary school in the lower county whose enrollment had shrunk to 212. That meager number of students and the prospect of an $800,000 renovation to put the building in first-class shape doomed it.

The superintendent's recommendation to close the school came with little warning to the community, and despite a public hearing before the board of ·lucation made its decision, some parents were incensed by what they termed a "precipitous action." Subsequently, several parents filed unsuccessful court suits to overturn the board decision.

The decision to close the school was made without early enough consultation with local government officials; and when, as Maryland law decrees, the no longer needed building was turned over to the local government, there were no funds to either maintain or tear it down. Vandals ravaged the building for almost a year until the county budgeted money to demolish it.

That same spring, in response to the rapidly increasing number of minority students in another school, the superintendent presented that community with a plan to convert it to a model open school. The community angrily rejected the plan, which it said was "imposed" on them, and the superintendent withdrew it.

From the outcry over these two situations, the board and district administration quickly realized they needed a formal community involvement process for determining further school closings. The enrollment decline was accelerating, and the community obviously wanted to be involved in reaching decisions about their schools.

In the spring of 1973, the superintendent appointed a citizens' advisory committee to study the problem of small schools. It found conflicting opinions on the educational benefits of small schools, but by applying certain objective criteria, it determined that a school with an enrollment below 200 cost an average of 20% more to run than a school of 300, and 25% more than a school with 500 to 600 students. In its December 1973 report, the committee recommended a rather complicated structure of community participation to begin assessing schools in areas with severe enrollment declines.

After six months of debate, the board adopted a small schools policy, which established criteria for examining schools and set in motion a citizen involvement process that soon became the proverbial tail that wagged the dog.

Because of its size, the school district is divided into six administrative areas. In three of them, Area Planning Committees (APCs) were appointed immediately to study their areas and to recommend schools or clusters of schools for possible consolidation or modification of operating practices. The APCs worked with varying degrees of success, depending largely on the quality of their leaders, who were elected by the committee members.

About six months later, nearly 60 schools were identified for further study by the APCs, and the board began forming Local Evaluation Committees (LECs) in each school. In some instances, when schools were identified as clusters, a Cluster Evaluation Committee (CEC) was formed to assess the problem from a group as well as an individual school perspective. Representation on each 15-member committee was determined from nominations by citizens' groups and appointment by the board. District and area staff members served as resource persons.

In the first phase of school closings, the various committees operated for a period of close to two years, many of them meeting weekly. No one ever tried to determine the number of hours expended to develop the volume of reports submitted by the proliferating APCs, LECs, and CECs.

One PTA president remarked, "During all this time we have been put in the posture of defending our school against closing and trying to tell the board what is right with it. We have not dared mention what is wrong. The problems that were there when we started are still there, and new ones have cropped up. But we could take no action toward improving the educational program for the children."

Several additional factors had significant bearing on the process. First, a new superintendent of schools was appointed at the beginning of the 1975-76 school year, requiring both the board and the multitude of citizens' committees to work with a completely unknown quantity. Second, the 500-square-mile school district was experiencing both growth and decline at the same time. A task force on secondary schools, appointed in the spring of 1975, recommended a new high school for the upper county while the lower county was in the process of deciding which elementary schools to close.

A third factor was especially critical. One of the areas soon discovered that enrollment decline did not yet warrant school closings, but its increasing racial imbalance required a solution. Committees formed to consider closings found themselves dealing with the emotion-charged issues of busing and quotas.

Data on enrollment by race revealed that the cluster, as originally designated, was too small to achieve racial balance no matter how the pupils might be sorted. Some persons alleged that political considerations prevented the board from enlarging the cluster despite

repeated recommendations from the citizens' committees. At virtually the eleventh hour, the board added two schools to the cluster, only to be hit by strong protests that those communities had no time to study and respond to plans that had been shaped by others.

Hostility and apprehension grew in the affected areas of the district as the process wore on. The situation tended to become an adversary proceeding, with the various schools' committees fighting one another with the board in the middle. The seven elected board members were under constant pressure from vocal residents of all the communities involved.

Many committee members, exhausted by their demanding meeting schedules, complained that the board and administration were playing a numbers game. Despite repeated requests, they charged that they could get no information on educational programs that might result from the options they were considering.

Those advocating voluntary methods to solve the racial imbalance problem, for example, believed that strong programming could create some attractive magnets while a mandatory plan would reduce the district's incentive to focus on the educational services provided at the end of bus rides.

Citizens who were assessing consolidations had little idea of the educational plans involving grade reorganization or alternative schools. The primary staff resource persons came from the office responsible for demographic planning. Not until a month before the board decision did any evidence of educational planning come from the curriculum office.

An Assessment

Kenneth Muir, MCPS public information officer, readily admits that, with hindsight, the process was too long and involved too many complex issues. "The board has adopted a more compressed timetable for considering future closings," he says. "But this was the first time, and they were groping to find a way to deal with a highly complex problem. Next time, they may take smaller bites and not try to deal with so many communities at once."

Muir notes that large, heterogeneous school systems are not likely to find one solution that will work in all areas. "Concentrate on one area," he says, "and know its educational and demographic problems well. Present a variety of alternatives, and always be ready to bend. That way, you open a dialogue. When you present a single plan, you merely offer something for people to oppose."

On the lack of program planning, Muir observes that initially the focus must be on the numbers and racial characteristics of students. But he agrees that the community's demands were reasonable and at least prototype educational programs must be offered for consideration as an integral part of the process.

Was the news media a problem to MCPS? Not according to Muir. "In a large community," he says, "most people get their information from the media, and we try to keep reporters well informed."

Montgomery County is served by two major weekly papers and two Washington, D.C. dailies. "We were always available to the weeklies, answering their questions with more rather than less information. We generally got good reports.

"Perhaps only New York City lives with the same problem we have regarding the dailies — they consider themselves newspapers to the world, and the activities of nearby counties get little space. We got good editorial support from the weeklies, after the decisions were made."

Communication with individual school communities was left largely in the hands of the LECs and the principal at each school.

A Shaky Decision

By April 1976, the board reached several decisions on the many recommendations submitted by APCs, LECs and CECs. It directed the closing of seven schools at the end of the 1975-76 school year. Five elementaries were to be closed due to declining enrollment; a junior high and a sixth elementary school both for declines and to improve racial balance.

A former PTA president of one of the schools said after hearing the decision, "The board performed brain surgery with a pickax."

In the cluster dealing solely with racial imbalance, the board closed no schools but adopted a plan of pairing and grade reorganization calling for mandatory busing. It rejected recommendations to start with a voluntary magnet program, because it believed the racial imbalance required quick resolution and that few parents would voluntarily move their children from neighborhood schools. In three other clusters, the board also directed some restructuring of grade and attendance patterns.

Some reactions from the affected communities were strongly negative. Parents in three schools undertook legal proceedings against the closings but lost. Parents in the area slated for mandatory busing have begun what may be a long legal battle over the constitutional question of assigning children to schools on the basis of race in the absence of a court order.

Finally, the MCPS estimate of $869,500 in savings for closing the schools materialized in the school budget, but amounted to a net saving of only $400,000 for the taxpayers. As long as the buildings were operated as schools, the state of Maryland paid the debt service. Once five of the seven were declared no longer necessary for school purposes, they had to be turned over to the county government. Bonded debt, maintenance and repairs then assumed by the county will have to be borne by the same taxpayers who support the school system.

"We should have alerted people to these other costs," says Muir, "even if we could not estimate what they would be without knowing what use the county would make of the buildings. What we did right, though, was to make the closing decisions early enough so the county could plan for their immediate use instead of being left to stand empty for vandals."

MCPS faced too many problems for one school board to digest all at once: declining enrollment in communities vastly different from one another, racial imbalance, numerous options and alternatives recommended by numerous citizens' committees, and a new superintendent with new ideas, to name just a few. It involved the community too intensively over too long a time and unrest and antagonism surfaced. MCPS is by no means finished with the problems of declining enrollment and racial imbalance.

In its second year of school closings, the board of education shortened the decision-making process to six months.

The superintendent named 14 schools in May 1976 for consideration regarding closing in June 1977. LECs were formed and they and the APCs submitted their initial reports in September.

During September and October, the board held what it called "dialogue sessions" where LEC/APC members, staff and board could discuss with each other various facts, alternatives and recommendations.

Following the dialogue sessions, the superintendent "tentatively" recommended closing eight of the fourteen schools. Each of the eight was then the subject of a public hearing before the superintendent made final recommendations and the board made its decisions in November 1976.